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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

JANUARY  
1992

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# interzone

## SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

**No 55****January 1992**

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# Interface

## David Pringle

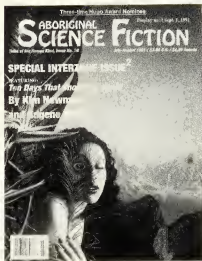
Interzone continues to enjoy a high reputation among the sf-and-fantasy cognoscenti in the United States of America. As I reported in IZ 52, we placed fourth in the "best magazine" category of Locus's 1991 readership poll – above such well-known American magazines as *Aboriginal*, *Amazing* and the quasi-sf *Omni*. We have been shortlisted for a Hugo Award for the past five or six years in a row. Moreover, we've just found out from the latest Locus that IZ has also been shortlisted for a World Fantasy Award, in the category "Special Award – Professional" (the results will have been announced by the time you read this, at the World Fantasy Convention to be held in Tucson over Halloween). All good signs. Individual American readers (and writers) continue to say nice things about the magazine. American editors praise some of the talented new writers we have nurtured (Greg Egan and Ian R. MacLeod are current hot faves among U.S. editors, according to our spy Paul McAuley, who attended the World SF Convention in Chicago). And yet...

### IZ's American Subscription Drive Flops

Sadly, the *Interzone*/Aboriginal swap (our issues 47 and 48; their issues 27 and 28) was not a success as far as the American results are concerned. While we took almost 100 new subscriptions for *Aboriginal*, they have taken just 40 new U.S. subs for *Interzone* – obviously a disappointment, as we had hoped for several hundred. (To remind you: IZ has a subscription base of about 2,000, whereas *Aboriginal* has 18,000.)

Does this mean that only 40 out of 18,000 *Aboriginal* subscribers were sufficiently impressed by the *Interzone* material to want to read further in this magazine? On the face of things, it would appear so; but **Charles C. Ryan**, editor and publisher of *AbSF*, assures us that the true reason for the failure of our marketing campaign to his readers lies elsewhere – overwhelmingly, it lies in the area of relative costs. We charge American subscribers \$52 for 12 issues of IZ; with some difficulty, we whittled that figure down to just \$40 as a special "first-time" offer to *Aboriginal* readers. Alas, to U.S. readers in general \$40 for 12 issues still seems extremely high.

*Aboriginal*'s own normal rate for 12



issues is \$26 in the USA (\$32 overseas). The most popular American sf monthly, *Asimov's*, charges \$34.95 as their official rate for an inland subscription; however, they also offer discount subs for as little as \$19.97 for 12 issues (according to an enticing postcard which fell out of the most recent copy of *Asimov's* I received; you can even buy additional gift subscriptions at \$18.95 for a year). Obviously figures of under \$20, or for that matter *AbSF*'s own figure of \$26, make IZ's "special offer" of \$40 look pretty sick – while our official rate of \$52 is just lost in the stratosphere. Yet we cannot afford to sell U.S. subs any cheaper: for at \$40 we are scarcely breaking even.

### A Lesson in Crazy Capitalist Economics

Why should there be this huge disparity between British and American prices? Partly, it's a matter of economy of scale: U.S. publishers have a home market which is four times as large as ours, and if you're printing upwards of 20,000 magazines (as *AbSF* is, and they're small by American standards) then the per-copy production cost is obviously very much lower than the equivalent British cost. Also, American inland postage rates are lower than the UK ones (on top of which, when we're servicing American subscriptions, the British Post Office makes us pay truly exorbitant overseas rates – rates which have risen at least twice in the past year, by higher degrees than the increases in domestic postage tariffs).

But such disparities in printing and postage costs are not the whole story. The fact is that American magazine subscriptions are quite ludicrously underpriced. (**Charles N. Brown** makes this point in gloomy tones almost every year in the pages of *Locus*; he's right.) In the USA it's a legal requirement for commercial magazines to print their audited circulation figures annually for all to see. Magazines over there are in savage competition with each other to keep their prices down and their circulations high. American readers, living as they do in a land of vast open spaces, have always shown a higher "propensity to subscribe" than British readers – to them, it's the normal way to buy a magazine – but the flip side of this is that they have also come to expect heavily discounted subscription rates. Subscribers' discounts in the USA are now running so high that many magazines can expect to make little or no profit from their subscriptions; in fact, they are servicing many of their subscribers at a loss. Why? In order to keep their circulation figures up. Why? In order to attract advertising revenue, which is where the true profit lies for most American magazines (though not, alas, for *Aboriginal*). Thus they are caught in a vicious circle of competitive price-cutting.

Despite his 18,000 subscribers – a figure which would be beyond our wildest dreams for an sf magazine in this country – **Charles Ryan** tells us that *Aboriginal SF* is losing money. The advertising revenue of his magazine has always been low, his news-stand sales are negligible, and most of his subscriptions have been gained at heavily discounted rates (which means in reality they have been "bought" at a price he cannot afford). *AbSF* is now seeking to get off this treadmill by having the magazine declared a "non-profit organization," which is to say a tax-exempt charity able to apply for grants and lower U.S. postage rates. The New England Science Fiction Association (NESFA) is assisting **Charles Ryan** in this matter, and we wish them the best of luck.

### Onwards...

We keep hopeful. In spite all the foregoing woe, we're not about to give up on the quest to enlarge *Interzone*'s readership. We're planning a large British subscription drive next spring,



with the help of a generous **Arts Council** "incentive funding" grant which has been promised and which should become available to us in January 1992. Luckily, in Britain you don't have to be a registered charity in order to procure such grants, and the Arts Council has been very helpful to us over the past several years. (Bless them.)

We're also investigating the possibility of expanding into the American market by the only means which now seem feasible – namely, by publishing a separate American edition, editorially identical to the British *Interzone* but printed and mailed in the USA, and marketed over there at a price U.S. readers are prepared to pay. Of course, if this happens it will depend on cooperation from willing American business partners: we'll see what transpires, and let you know when there is definite news.

## The Hugo Results

The 1991 **Hugo Awards** for science fiction were announced at the World SF Convention in Chicago in September. As usual, *Interzone* was nominated for an award in the category "Best Semi-Prozine," but as usual we failed to win. The winners in the various categories were:

- Best novel: *The Vor Game* by **Lois McMaster Bujold**
- Best novella: "The Hemingway Hoax" by **Joe Haldeman**
- Best novelette: "The Manamouki" by **Mike Resnick**
- Best short story: "Bears Discover Fire" by **Terry Bisson**
- Best non-fiction: *How to Write SF & Fantasy* by **Orson Scott Card**
- Best professional editor: **Gardner Dozois**
- Best professional artist: **Michael Whelan**
- Best dramatic presentation: **Edward Scissorhands**
- Best semi-prozine: **Locus**
- Best fanzine: **Lan's Lantern**
- Best fan writer: **David Langford**
- Best fan artist: **Teddy Harvia**
- John W. Campbell Award (new writer): **Julia Ecklar**

We must congratulate *IZ* contributor **Dave Langford** for winning the fan-writer Hugo yet again; but, overall, this year's results seem disappointingly "samey" and predictable (although it's pleasing to see the amiably eccentric **Edward Scissorhands** beat the blockbusting *Total Recall*, by a narrow margin, for the "dramatic presentation" award). In certain categories, the same individual or publication tends to win year after year, which leads us to suspect that many of the Worldcon attendees are voting from reflex rather than thought. Apparently, the attendance at this year's Worldcon was low by normal

American standards – presumably due to the economic recession – and it may be that the smaller voting base led to slightly more conservative (and in-group) voting patterns than usual.

## Fear and GMI Cease Publication

Newfield Publications, the Shropshire-based company that produced the horror magazine *Fear* and the fantasy games magazine *Games Master International*, as well as a slew of computer mags, ceased trading in October 1991. Apparently they have gone bust owing half a million pounds. (The recession bites, you see.) There is talk of *Fear* being revived by editor **John Gilbert**, or alternatively of it being bought by another company (Pegasus, the Birmingham company which publishes *Fontozio*, is said to be in the running). Meanwhile, Britain's other surviving horror magazine, *The Dark Side*, has been dropped by its original publishers, Maxwell Specialist Magazines; however, it has promptly been revived by its editor **Allan Bryce**, who has bought rights to the title from Maxwell, and Mr Bryce says its future is rosy.

## Interzone 1991 Popularity Poll

Finally, it's that time of year again. This is the January 1992 issue, mailed in early December 1991. Over the Christmas period, we'd be grateful if *IZ* readers could bend their minds to the matter of rating the past year's stories, articles and illustrations. Let us know your thoughts on the contents of issues 43 to 54 inclusive (you don't need to wait until you've read the present issue, as it will count towards next year's poll).

We'd appreciate it if readers (especially those who are renewing their subscriptions) could send us answers to the following questions. Just write or type your replies on any piece of paper and send them to us before the deadline of **1st February 1992**. We'll analyze the results in February, and report on them in this column next spring. As last year, any further comments about the general direction of the magazine would also be most welcome.

- 1) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 43-54 inclusive (i.e. those with a 1991 cover date) did you particularly like?
- 2) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 43-54 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?
- 3) Which artists' illustrations (including covers) in *Interzone* issues 43-54 inclusive did you particularly like?
- 4) Which artists' illustrations (including covers) in *Interzone* issues 43-54 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?
- 5) Which non-fiction items in *Inter-*

zone issues 43-54 inclusive did you particularly like?

6) Which non-fiction items in *Interzone* issues 43-54 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?

## And What About Other Folks' Stories?

We'd like to add another question this year, pertaining to sf and fantasy short stories which have appeared in British publications other than *Interzone*. (But don't feel you have to attempt to answer it if your reading knowledge is confined to *IZ* alone.)

7) Which stories in British sf/fantasy publications other than *Interzone*, and carrying a 1991 publication date, did you particularly enjoy?

Magazines and anthologies which published new sf in the UK during 1991 include: *Fear* (ed. John Gilbert), *New Worlds* (ed. David Garnett), *Temps* (ed. Neil Gaiman & Alex Stewart), *Toles of the Wandering Jew* (ed. Brian Stableford), *Interzone: The 5th Anthology* (ed. Clute, Montgomerie & Pringle; contains two original stories), *BRR* (ed. Chris Reed), *R.E.M.* (ed. Arthur Straker), *Dream/New Moon SF* (ed. Trevor Jones), *Far Point* (ed. Charlie Righy), *Scheherozade* (ed. Liz Cournihan), *The Unusual Genitals Party* (ed. Glasgow SF Writers' Circle), and so on and on down into the nether reaches of a very active small press. We look forward to hearing your thoughts! (**David Pringle**)

# Interaction

Dear Editors:

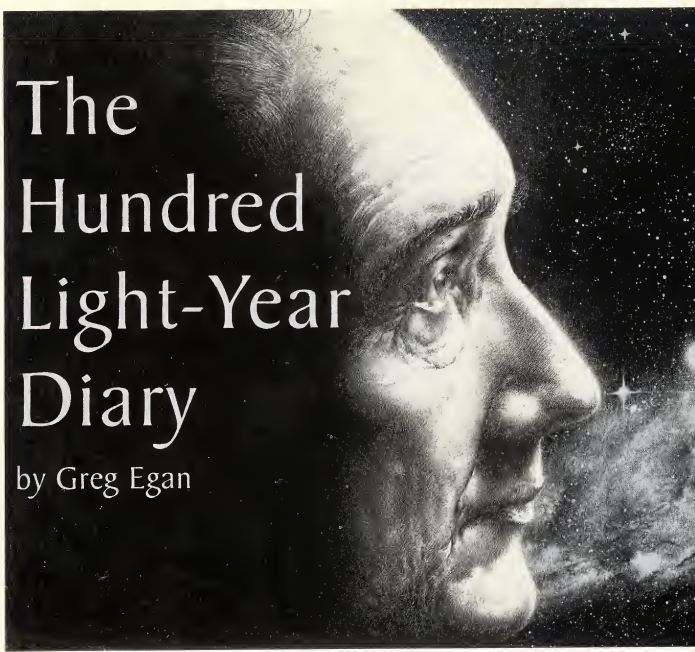
I just returned from a week's vacation, camping on your own Sceptered Isle – my wife and I drove over from Germany. We visited a great many places: Dover, Canterbury, Leeds, York, Whitby (of Dracula's abbey fame) and of course, London, to name a few, and (believe it or not) the sun shone every day.

I was on a quest. A quest for your magazine. As fate would have it, I still am.

*IZ* was not to be found in any of the several W.H. Smith's bookstores I perused, including one in Canterbury that would have brought tears to the eyes of a Wolden Books CEO. Quoth one of several managers, "We've got TV Zone...Star trek and the like...But not *Interzone*." This after a long, blinking stare and several repetitions of your twilight appellation.

The Leeds University Bookstore microfiche catalogued only a single hardcover anthology bearing the *IZ*

Continued on page 22



# The Hundred Light-Year Diary

by Greg Egan

**M**artin Place was packed with the usual frantic lunchtime crowds. I scanned the faces nervously; the moment had almost arrived, and I still hadn't even caught sight of Alison. *One twenty-seven and fourteen seconds.* Would I be mistaken about something so important? With the knowledge of the mistake still fresh in my mind? But that knowledge could make no difference. Of course it would affect my state of mind, of course it would influence my actions – but I already knew exactly what the net result of that, and every other, influence would be: I'd write what I'd read.

I needn't have worried. I looked down at my watch, and as 1:27:13 became 1:27:14, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned; it was Alison, of course. I'd never seen her before, in the flesh, but I'd soon devote a month's bandwidth allocation to sending back a Barnsley-compressed snapshot. I hesitated, then spoke my lines, awful as they were:

"Fancy meeting you here."

She smiled, and suddenly I was overwhelmed, giddy with happiness – exactly as I'd read in my diary

a thousand times, since I'd first come across the day's entry at the age of nine; exactly as I would, necessarily, describe it at the terminal that night. But – foreknowledge aside – how could I have felt anything but euphoria? I'd finally met the woman I'd spend my life with. We had fifty-eight years together ahead of us, and we'd love each other to the end.

"So, where are we going for lunch?"

I frowned slightly, wondering if she was joking – and wondering why I'd left myself in any doubt. I said, hesitantly, "Fulvio's. Didn't you...?" But of course she had no idea of the petty details of the meal; on 14th December, 2074, I'd write admiringly: A. concentrates on the things that matter; she never lets herself be distracted by trivia.

I said, "Well, the food won't be ready on time; they'll have screwed up their schedule, but –"

She put a finger to her lips, then leant forward and kissed me. For a moment, I was too shocked to do anything but stand there like a statue, but after a second or two, I started kissing back.

When we parted, I said stupidly, "I didn't know



...I thought we just...I—"

"James, you're blushing."

She was right. I laughed, embarrassed. It was absurd: in a week's time, we'd make love, and I already knew every detail—yet that single unexpected kiss left me flustered and confused.

She said, "Come on. Maybe the food won't be ready, but we have a lot to talk about while we're waiting. I just hope you haven't read it all in advance, or you're going to have a very boring time."

She took my hand and started leading the way. I followed, still shaken. Halfway to the restaurant, I finally managed to say, "Back then—did you know that would happen?"

She laughed. "No. But I don't tell myself everything. I like to be surprised now and then. Don't you?"

Her casual attitude stung me. Never lets herself be distracted by trivia. I struggled for words; this whole conversation was unknown to me, and I never was much good at improvising anything but small talk.

I said, "Today is important to me. I always thought I'd write the most careful—the most complete—

account of it possible. I mean, I'm going to record the time we met, to the second. I can't imagine sitting down tonight and not even mentioning the first time we kissed."

She squeezed my hand, then moved close to me and whispered, mock-conspiratorially: "But you will. You know you will. And so will I. You know exactly what you're going to write, and exactly what you're going to leave out—and the fact is, that kiss is going to remain our little secret."

**F**rancis Chen wasn't the first astronomer to hunt for time-reversed galaxies, but he was the first to do so from space. He swept the sky with a small instrument in a junk-scattered near-Earth orbit, long after all serious work had shifted to the (relatively) unpolluted vacuum on the far side of the moon. For decades, certain—highly speculative—cosmological theories had suggested that it might be possible to catch glimpses of the universe's future phase of re-contraction, during which—perhaps—all the arrows of time would be reversed.

Chen charged up a light detector to saturation, and searched for a region of the sky which would unexpose it – discharging the pixels in the form of a recognizable image. The photons from ordinary galaxies, collected by ordinary telescopes, left their mark as patterns of charge on arrays of electro-optical polymer; a time-reversed galaxy would require instead that the detector lose charge, emitting photons which would leave the telescope on a long journey into the future universe, to be absorbed by stars tens of billions of years hence, contributing an infinitesimal nudge to drive their nuclear processes from extinction back towards birth.

Chen's announcement of success was met with virtually unanimous scepticism – and rightly so, since he refused to divulge the coordinates of his discovery. I've seen the recording of his one-and-only press conference.

"What would happen if you pointed an uncharged detector at this thing?" asked one puzzled journalist.

"You can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"Suppose you point a detector at an ordinary light source. Unless the detector's not working, it will end up charged. It's no use declaring: *I am going to expose this detector to light, and it will end up uncharged.* That's ludicrous; it simply won't happen."

"Yes, but –"

"Now time-reverse the whole situation. If you're going to point a detector at a time-reversed light source, it will be charged beforehand."

"But if you discharge the whole thing thoroughly, before exposing it, and then..."

"I'm sorry. You won't. You can't."

Shortly afterwards, Chen retired into self-imposed obscurity – but his work had been government funded, and he'd complied with the rigorous auditing requirements, so copies of all his notes existed in various archives. It was almost five years before anyone bothered to exhume them – new theoretical work having made his claims more fashionable – but once the coordinates were finally made public, it took only days for a dozen groups to confirm the original results.

Most of the astronomers involved dropped the matter there and then – but three people pressed on, to the logical conclusion:

Suppose an asteroid, a few hundred billion kilometres away, happened to block the line of sight between Earth and Chen's galaxy. In the galaxy's time frame, there'd be a delay of half an hour or so before this occultation could be seen in near-Earth orbit – before the last photons to make it past the asteroid arrived. Our time frame runs the other way, though; for us, the "delay" would be negative. We might think of the detector, not the galaxy, as the source of the photons – but it would still have to stop emitting them half an hour before the asteroid crossed the line of sight, in order to emit them only when they'd have a clear path all the way to their destination. Cause and effect; the detector has to have a reason to lose charge and emit photons – even if that reason lies in the future.

Replace the uncontrollable – and unlikely – asteroid with a simple electronic shutter. Fold up the line of sight with mirrors, shrinking the experiment down to more manageable dimensions – and allowing

you to place the shutter and detector virtually side by side. Flash a torch at yourself in a mirror, and you get a signal from the past; do the same with the light from Chen's galaxy, and the signal comes from the future.

Hazzard, Capaldi and Wu arranged a pair of space-borne mirrors, a few thousand kilometres apart. With multiple reflections, they achieved an optical path length of over two light-seconds. At one end of this "delay" they placed a telescope, aimed at Chen's galaxy; at the other end they placed a detector. ("The other end" optically speaking – physically, it was housed in the very same satellite as the telescope.) In their first experiments, the telescope was fitted with a shutter triggered by the "unpredictable" decay of a small sample of a radioactive isotope.

The sequence of the shutter's opening and closing, and the detector's rate of discharge, were logged by a computer. The two sets of data were compared – and the patterns, unsurprisingly, matched. Except, of course, that the detector began discharging two seconds before the shutter opened, and ceased discharging two seconds before it closed.

So, they replaced the isotope trigger with a manual control, and took turns trying to change the immutable future.

Hazzard said, in an interview several months later: "At first, it seemed like some kind of perverse reaction-time test: instead of having to hit the green button when the green light came on, you had to try to hit the red button, and vice versa. And at first, I really believed I was 'obeying' the signal only because I couldn't discipline my reflexes to do anything so 'difficult' as contradicting it. In retrospect, I know that was a rationalization, but I was quite convinced at the time. So I had the computer swap the conventions – and of course, that didn't help. Whenever the display said I was going to open the shutter – however it expressed that fact – I opened it."

"And how did that make you feel? Soulless? Robotic? A prisoner to fate?"

"No. At first, just...clumsy. Uncoordinated. So clumsy I couldn't hit the wrong button, no matter how hard I tried. And then, after a while, the whole thing began to seem perfectly...normal. I wasn't being 'forced' to open the shutter; I was opening it precisely when I felt like opening it, and observing the consequences – observing them before the event, yes, but that hardly seemed important any more. Wanting to 'not open' it when I already knew that I would seemed as absurd as wanting to change something in the past that I already knew had happened. Does not being able to rewrite history make you feel 'soulless'?"

"No."

"This was exactly the same."

Extending the device's range was easy; by having the detector itself trigger the shutter in a feedback loop, two seconds could become four seconds, or four hours, or four days. Or four centuries – in theory. The real problem was bandwidth; simply blocking off the view of Chen's galaxy, or not, coded only a single bit of information, and the shutter couldn't be strobed at too high a rate, since the detector took almost half a second to lose enough charge to unequivocally signal a future exposure.

Bandwidth is still a problem, although the current



generation of Hazzard Machines have path lengths of a hundred light years, and detectors made up of millions of pixels, each one sensitive enough to be modulated at megabaud rates. Governments and large corporations use most of this vast capacity, for purposes that remain obscure – and still they're desperate for more.

As a birthright, though, everyone on the planet is granted one hundred and twenty-eight bytes a day. With the most efficient data compression schemes, this can code about a hundred words of text; not enough to describe the future in microscopic detail, but enough for a summary of the day's events.

A hundred words a day; three million words in a lifetime. The last entry in my own diary was received in 2032, eighteen years before my birth, one hundred years before my death. The history of the next millennium is taught in schools: the end of famine and disease, the end of nationalism and genocide, the end of poverty, bigotry and superstition. There are glorious times ahead.

If our descendants are telling the truth.

**T**he wedding was, mostly, just as I'd known it would be. The best man, Pria, had his arm in a sling from a mugging in the early hours of the morning – we'd laughed over that when we'd first met, in high school, a decade before.

"But what if I stay out of that alley?" he'd joked.

"Then I'll have to break it for you, won't I? You're not shunting my wedding day!"

Shunting was a fantasy for children, the subject of juvenile schlock-ROMs. Shunting was what happened when you grimaced and sweated and gritted your teeth and *absolutely* refused to participate in something unpleasant that you knew was going to happen. In the ROMs, the offending future was magicked away into a parallel universe, by sheer mental discipline and the force of plot convenience. Drinking the right brand of cola also seemed to help.

In real life, with the advent of the Hazzard Machines, the rates of death and injury through crime, natural disaster, industrial and transport accidents, and many kinds of disease, had certainly plummeted – but such events weren't forecast and then paradoxically "avoided"; they simply, consistently, became increasingly rare in reports from the future – reports which proved to be as reliable as those from the past.

A residue of "seemingly avoidable" tragedies remain, though, and the people who know that they're going to be involved react in different ways: some swallow their fate cheerfully; some seek comfort (or anaesthesia) in somnambulist religions; a few succumb to the wish-fulfilment fantasies of the ROMs, and go kicking and screaming all the way.

When I met up with Pria, on schedule, in the Casualty Department of St Vincent's, he was a bloody, shivering mess. His arm was broken, as expected. He'd also been sodomized with a bottle and slashed on the arms and chest. I stood beside him in a daze, choking on the sour taste of all the stupid jokes I'd made, unable to shake the feeling that I was to blame. *I'd lie to him, lie to myself* –

As they pumped him full of pain-killers and tranquillizers, he said, "Fuck it, James, I'm not letting on. I'm not going to say how bad it was; I'm not frightening



that kid to death. And you'd better not, either." I nodded earnestly and swore that I wouldn't; redundantly, of course, but the poor man was delirious.

And when it came time to write up the day's events, I dutifully regurgitated the light-hearted treatment of my friend's assault that I'd memorized long before I even knew him.

Dutifully? Or simply because the cycle was closed, because I had no choice but to write what I'd already read? Or... both? Ascribing motives is a strange business, but I'm sure it always has been. Knowing the future doesn't mean we've been subtracted out of the equations that shape it. Some philosophers still ramble on about "the loss of free will" (I suppose they can't help themselves), but I've never been able to find a meaningful definition of what they think this magical thing ever was. The future has always been determined. What else could affect human actions, other than each individual's—unique and complex—inheritance and past experience? Who we are decides what we do — and what greater "freedom" could anyone demand? If "choice" wasn't grounded absolutely in cause and effect, what would decide its outcome? Meaningless random glitches from quantum noise in the brain? (A popular theory — before quantum indeterminism was shown to be nothing but an artefact of the old time-asymmetric world view.) Or some mystical invention called the soul... but then what, precisely, would govern its behaviour? Laws of metaphysics every bit as problematical as those of neurophysiology.

I believe we've lost nothing; rather, we've gained the only freedom we ever lacked: who we are is now shaped by the future, as well as the past. Our lives resonate like plucked strings, standing waves formed by the collision of information flowing back and forth in time.

Information — and disinformation.

Alison looked over my shoulder at what I'd typed. "You've got to be kidding," she said.

I replied by hitting the CHECK key — a totally unnecessary facility, but that's never stopped anyone using it. The text I'd just typed matched the received version precisely. (People have talked about automating the whole process — transmitting what must be transmitted, without any human intervention whatsoever — but nobody's ever done it, so perhaps it's impossible.)

I hit SAVE, burning the day's entry onto the chip that would be transmitted shortly after my death, then said — numbly, idiotically (and inevitably) — "What if I'd warned him?"

She shook her head. "Then you'd have warned him. It still would have happened."

"Maybe not. Why couldn't life turn out better than the diary, not worse? Why couldn't it turn out that we'd made the whole thing up — that he hadn't been attacked at all?"

"Because it didn't."

I sat at the desk for a moment longer, staring at the words that I couldn't take back, that I never could have taken back. But my lies were the lies I'd promised to tell; I'd done the right thing, hadn't I? I'd known for years exactly what I'd "choose" to write — but that didn't change the fact that the words had been determined, not by "fate," not by "destiny," but by who I was.

I switched off the terminal, stood up and began undressing. Alison headed for the bathroom. I called out after her, "Do we have sex tonight, or not? I never say."

She laughed. "Don't ask me, James. You're the one who insists on keeping track of these things."

I sat down on the bed, disconcerted. It was our wedding night, after all; surely I could read between the lines.

But I never was much good at improvising.

**T**he Australian federal election of 2077 was the closest for fifty years, and would remain so for almost another century. A dozen independents — including three members of a new ignorance cult, called God Averts His Gaze — held the balance of power, but deals to ensure stable government had been stitched together well in advance, and would survive the four-year term.

Consistently, I suppose, the campaign was also among the most heated in recent memory, or short-term anticipation. The soon-to-be Opposition Leader never tired of listing the promises the new Prime Minister would break; she in turn countered with statistics of the mess he'd create as Treasurer, in the mid-eighties. (The causes of that impending recession were still being debated by economists; most claimed it was an "essential precursor" of the prosperity of the nineties, and that The Market, in its infinite, time-spanning wisdom, would choose/had chosen the best of all possible futures. Personally, I suspect it simply proved that even foresight was no cure for incompetence.)

I often wondered how the politicians felt, mouthing the words they'd known they'd utter ever since their parents first showed them the future-history ROMs, and explained what lay ahead. No ordinary person could afford the bandwidth to send back moving pictures; only the newsworthy were forced to confront such detailed records of their lives, with no room for ambiguity or euphemism. The cameras, of course, could lie — digital video fraud was the easiest thing in the world — but mostly they didn't. I wasn't surprised that people made (seemingly) impassioned election speeches which they knew would get them nowhere; I'd read enough past-history to realize that that had always been the case. But I'd like to have discovered what went on in their heads as they lip-synched their way through interviews and debates, parliamentary question time and party conferences, all captured in high-resolution holographic perfection for posterity. With every syllable, every gesture, known in advance, did they feel as if they'd been reduced to twitching puppets? (If so, maybe that, too, had always been the case.) Or was the smooth flow of rationalization as efficient as ever? After all, when I filled in my diary each night, I was just as tightly constrained, but I could — almost always — find a good reason to write what I knew I'd write.

Lisa was on the staff of a local candidate who was due to be voted into office. I met her a fortnight before the election, at a fund-raising dinner. To date, I'd had nothing to do with the candidate, but at the turn of the century — by which time, the man's party would be back in office yet again, with a substantial majority — I'd head an engineering firm which would gain

several large contracts from State governments of the same political flavour. I'd be coy in my own description of the antecedents of this good fortune – but my bank statement included transactions six months in advance, and I duly made the generous donation that the records implied. In fact, I'd been a little shocked when I'd first seen the print-out, but I'd had time to accustom myself to the idea, and the *de facto* bribe no longer seemed so grossly out of character.

The evening was dull beyond redemption (I'd later describe it as "tolerable"), but as the guests dispersed into the night, Lisa appeared beside me and said matter-of-factly, "I believe you and I are going to share a taxi."

I sat beside her in silence, while the robot vehicle carried us smoothly towards her apartment. Alison was spending the weekend with an old school friend, whose mother would die that night. I knew I wouldn't be unfaithful. I loved my wife, I always would. Or at least, I'd always claim to. But if that wasn't proof enough, I couldn't believe I'd keep such a secret from myself for the rest of my life.

When the taxi stopped, I said, "What now? You ask me in for coffee? And I politely decline?"

She said, "I have no idea. The whole weekend's a mystery to me."

The elevator was broken; a sticker from Building Maintenance read: OUT OF ORDER UNTIL 11:06 am, 3/2/78. I followed Lisa up twelve flights of stairs, inventing excuses all the way: *I was proving my freedom, my spontaneity – proving that my life was more than a fossilized pattern of events in time.* But the truth was, I'd never felt trapped by my knowledge of the future, never felt any need to delude myself that I had the power to live any life but one. The whole idea of an unknown liaison filled me with panic and vertigo. The bland white lies that I'd already written were unsettling enough – but if anything at all could happen in the spaces between the words, then I no longer knew who I was, or who I might become. My whole life would dissolve into quicksand.

I was shaking as we undressed each other.

"Why are we doing this?"

"Because we can."

"Do you know me? Will you write about me? About us?"

She shook her head. "No."

"But...how long will this last? *I have to know.* One night? A month? A year? How will it end?" I was losing my mind: how could I start something like this, when I didn't even know how it would end?

She laughed. "Don't ask me. Look it up in your own diary, if it's so important to you."

I couldn't leave it alone, I couldn't shut up. "You must have written something. You knew we'd share that taxi."

"No. I just said that."

"You –" I stared at her.

"It came true, though, didn't it? How about that?"

She sighed, slid her hands down my spine, pulled me onto the bed. Down into the quicksand.

"Will we –" She clamped her hand over my mouth.

"No more questions. I don't keep a diary. I don't know anything at all."



**L**ying to Alison was easy; I was almost certain that I'd get away with it. Lying to myself was easier still. Filling out my diary became a formality, a meaningless ritual; I scarcely glanced at the words I wrote. When I did pay attention, I could barely keep a straight face: amidst the merely lazy and deceitful elision and euphemism were passages of deliberate irony which had been invisible to me for years, but which I could finally appreciate for what they were. Some of my paeans to marital bliss seemed "dangerously" heavy-handed; I could scarcely believe that I'd never picked up the subtext before. But I hadn't. There was no "risk" of tipping myself off—I was "free" to be every bit as sarcastic as I "chose" to be.

No more, no less.

The ignorance cults say that knowing the future robs us of our souls; by losing the power to choose between right and wrong, we cease to be human. To them, ordinary people are literally the walking dead: meat puppets, zombies. The somnambulists believe much the same thing, but—rather than seeing this as a tragedy of apocalyptic dimensions—embrace the idea with dreamy enthusiasm. They see a merciful end to responsibility, guilt and anxiety, striving and failing; a descent into inanimacy, the leaching of our souls into a great cosmic spiritual blanchmange, while our bodies hang around, going through the motions.

For me, though, knowing the future—or believing that I did—never made me feel like a sleepwalker, a zombie in a senseless, amoral trance. It made me feel I was in control of my life. One person held sway across the decades, tying the disparate threads together, making sense of it all. How could that unity make me less than human? Everything I did grew out of who I was: who I had been, and who I would be.

I only started feeling like a soulless automaton when I tore it all apart with lies.

**A**fter school, few people pay much attention to history, past or future—let alone that grey zone between the two which used to be known as "current affairs." Journalists continue to collect information and scatter it across time, but there's no doubt that they now do a very different job than they did in pre-Hazard days, when the live broadcast, the latest dispatch, had a real, if fleeting, significance. The profession hasn't died out completely; it's as if a kind of equilibrium has been reached between apathy and curiosity, and if we had any less news flowing from the future, there "would be" a greater effort made to gather it and send it back. How valid such arguments can be—with their implications of dynamism, of hypothetical alternative worlds cancelled out by their own inconsistencies—I don't know, but the balance is undeniable. We learn precisely enough to keep us from wanting to know any more.

On 8th July, 2079, when Chinese troops moved into Kashmir to "stabilize the region"—by wiping out the supply lines to the separatists within their own borders—I hardly gave it a second thought. I knew the U.N. would sort out the whole mess with remarkable dexterity; historians had praised the Secretary General's diplomatic resolution of the crisis for decades, and, in a rare move for the conservative Academy, she'd been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize three years in advance of the efforts which would earn it. My

memory of the details was sketchy, so I called up *The Global Yearbook*. The troops would be out by 3rd August; casualties would be few. Duly comforted, I got on with my life.

I heard the first rumours from Pria, who'd taken to sampling the countless underground communications nets. Gossip and slander for computer freaks; a harmless enough pastime, but I'd always been amused by the participants' conceit that they were "plugged-in" to the global village, that they had their fingers on the pulse of the planet. Who needed to be wired to the moment, when the past and the future could be examined at leisure? Who needed the latest unsubstantiated static, when a sober, considered version of events which had stood the test of time could be had just as soon—or sooner?

So when Pria told me solemnly that a full-scale war had broken out in Kashmir, and that people were being slaughtered by the thousands, I said, "Sure. And Maura got the Nobel Prize for genocide."

He shrugged. "You ever heard of a man called Henry Kissinger?"

I had to admit that I hadn't.

**I** mentioned the story to Lisa, disparagingly, confident that she'd laugh along with me. She rolled over to face me and said, "He's right."

I didn't know whether to take the bait; she had a strange sense of humour, she might have been teasing. Finally, I said, "He can't be. I've checked. All the histories agree —"

She looked genuinely surprised before her expression turned to pity; she'd never thought much of me, but I don't think she'd ever believed I was quite so naive.

"The victors have always written the 'history,' James. Why should the future be any different? Believe me. It's happening."

"How do you know?" It was a stupid question; her boss was on all the foreign affairs committees, and would be Minister next time the party was in power. If he didn't have access to the intelligence in his present job, he would in the long term.

She said, "We're helping to fund it, of course. Along with Europe, Japan, and the States. Thanks to the embargo after the Hong Kong riots, the Chinese have no war drones; they're pitting human soldiers with obsolete equipment against the best Vietnamese robots. Four hundred thousand troops and a hundred thousand civilians will die—while the Allies sit in Berlin playing their solipsist video games."

I stared past her, into the darkness, numb and disbelieving. "Why? Why couldn't things have been worked out, defused in time?"

She scowled. "How? You mean, shunted? Known about, then avoided?"

"No, but... if everyone knew the truth, if this hadn't been covered up —"

"What? If people had known it would happen, it wouldn't have? Grow up. It is happening, it will go on happening; there's nothing else to say."

I climbed out of bed and started dressing, although I had no reason to hurry home. Alison knew all about us; apparently, she'd known since childhood that her husband would turn out to be a piece of shit.

*Half a million people slaughtered. It wasn't fate, it*



wasn't destiny – there was no Will of God, no Force of History to absolve us. It grew out of who we were: the lies we'd told, and would keep on telling. Half a million people slaughtered in the spaces between the words.

I vomited on the carpet, then stumbled about dizzily, cleaning it up. Lisa watched me sadly.

"You're not coming back, are you?"

I laughed weakly. "How the fuck should I know?"

"You're not."

"I thought you didn't keep a diary."

"I don't."

And I finally understood why.

**A**lison woke when I switched on the terminal, and said sleepily, without rancour, "What's the hurry, James? If you've masturbated about tonight since you were twelve years old, surely you'll still remember it all in the morning."

I ignored her. After a while, she got out of bed and came and looked over my shoulder.

"Is this true?" I nodded.

"And you knew all along? You're going to send this?"

I shrugged and hit the CHECK key. A message box popped up on the screen: 95 WORDS; 95 ERRORS.

I sat and stared at this verdict for a long time. What did I think? I had the power to change history? My puny outrage could shunt the war? Reality would dissolve around me, and another – better – world would take its place?

No. History, past and future, was determined, and I couldn't help being part of the equations that shaped it – but I didn't have to be part of the lies.

I hit the SAVE key, and burned those 95 words onto the chip, irreversibly.

(I'm sure I had no choice.)

That was my last diary entry – and I can only assume that the same computers that will filter it out of my posthumous transmission will also fill in the unwritten remainder, extrapolating an innocuous life for me, fit for a child to read.

I tap into the nets at random, listening to the whole spectrum of conflicting rumours, hardly knowing what to believe. I've left my wife, I've left my job, parting ways entirely with my rosy, fictitious future. All my certainties have evaporated: I don't know when I'll die; I don't know who I'll love; I don't know if the world is heading for Utopia, or Armageddon.

But I keep my eyes open, and I feed what little of value I can gather back into the nets. There must be corruption and distortion here, too – but I'd rather swim in this cacophony of a million contradictory voices than drown in the smooth and plausible lies of those genocidal authors of history who control the Hazzard Machines.

Sometimes I wonder how different my life might have been without their intervention – but the question is meaningless. It couldn't have been any other way. Everyone is manipulated; everyone is a product of their times. And vice versa.

Whatever the unchangeable future holds, I'm sure of one thing: *who I am* is still a part of what always has, and always will, decide it.

I can ask for no greater freedom than that.

And no greater responsibility.



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Stronge Plasma

Greg Egan was born in Australia in 1961. One of this magazine's most popular writers, he kindly provided the above bibliography of his published fiction to date in lieu of an interview. Since the list was drawn up we have heard that he has sold a new sf novel called *Quarantine to Random*

Century/Legend Books. The publishers are so enthusiastic that they have given him a three-book contract, to include a second novel (as yet unwritten) and a collection of short stories.

# Tracks

## Nicholas Royle

“Do you love me?”  
“Of course I love you.”  
“Are you sure?”  
“Yes, I’m sure.”

I used to torment Melanie like this a lot, unintentionally, constantly asking the same questions when the answer should have been abundantly clear: of course she loved me. She told me sometimes how irritating it was and in exasperation asked: “What do I have to do to convince you I love you?”

“Nothing,” I’d say, “Just keep on loving me.”

She’d reply: “But if you constantly doubt me I feel undermined. It’s tiring.” An edge would have crept into her voice and I’d feel compelled to ask again: “Do you love me?”

Egerton spoke: “That company in Birmingham have paid, Alex.” He flashed me a proud smile as he passed on this information. Egerton was responsible for chasing up bad debts. “That means you can go ahead and process their festival entry. The cheque arrived in the lunchtime delivery.”

I couldn’t care less about the Birmingham company paying up – I’d already processed their festival entry in the knowledge that I could delete it in one keystroke if they failed to pay – but Egerton’s interruption reminded me of what had happened before I left home for work that morning.

Melanie lived in the Midlands, which accounted in part for my insecurity in our relationship: I lived in London and missed her during the week when we were not together. We wrote letters so I was always eager for the sound of the postman in the mornings. He often came when I was in the bath, gaining entry from the street by pressing the service bell, then climbing the stairs to deliver letters to the individual flats. I waited for the rattle of the letter box.

It had become one of my favourite sounds, and I invariably jumped out of the bath to see what the postman had brought, then got straight back in. Bills I dropped unopened on the bathroom floor where they generally stayed for at least a week. Circulars and marketing scams from *Reader’s Digest* went straight behind the laundry basket and only when the basket started to walk did I take them and put them in the rubbish. If there was a letter from Melanie I would open it and read it in the bath, sinking down in the bubbles and steam, always a sensuous experience, to be enjoyed to the full, even if it meant being late for work.

She wrote long, involved letters. They all said how much she loved me, but I still found it hard to believe anyone could love me as much as she claimed to. Does she love me? I used to ask the inflatable frog soap-dish. Does she really love me?

The letter box rattled and I jumped up, quickly drying my feet before stepping out on to the bathmat. It was only three steps out of the bathroom and into the hall to reach the front door.

There was nothing lying on the Oh-No-Not-You-Again doormat. I lifted my leather jacket which hung on a hook on the back of the door, but there was nothing sticking out of the letter box. I unlocked the door and opened it a crack, the cold draught reminding me I was naked and wet. The postman sometimes left larger items outside in the hallway but there was nothing there today. Puzzled, I closed the door. I had heard the flap bang shut. It was an unmistakable sound. I bent down and opened the flap again, peering inside, even pushing open the exterior flap with my dripping fingers. Not a thing.

I lifted the doormat. On the carpet underneath the mat were just the familiar brown stains left by the stencilled words.

Nothing.

It was impossible. I had heard it. I got down on my hands and knees and scanned the hall floor. I looked behind the storage heater and in the wardrobe cupboard in case the letter had broken the usual laws of movement through space.

Disconsolately I drained the bath and tried to come to terms with the possibility that the luxury of my bath had lulled me to sleep and I dreamt the rattling letter box out of wish fulfilment.

Egerton was always a source of acute irritation, but inadvertently reminding me of the morning’s phantom delivery was too much for me to bear. I cleared my screen with a short sequence of angry keystrokes and left the office. From behind his desk in his own office Whitehead saw me slamming out. I hoped I hadn’t incurred Whitehead’s displeasure. I tolerated him marginally better than Egerton, but Whitehead was the boss and I needed the job.

Across the road I bought a bar of chocolate in the shop and ate it sat on a railing. There was a payphone near by and I contemplated ringing Melanie to see if she’d posted me a letter the day before. I still wasn’t completely satisfied by the dream theory. I wondered if maybe the postman had rattled my box in error or

— and my chest tightened as I thought of this — on purpose to torment me because he knew how much I looked forward to receiving letters.

I didn't phone Melanie because it seemed silly to pay when I could call her from the office for nothing.

"The Arsenal stuffed up their chances yesterday, eh, Alex?" Egerton asked just as I was reaching for my phone. He seemed to think that if he leavened his accountancy qualifications with a little authentic-sounding football chat and the odd reference to his heavy weekend drinking, people would not think him a boring bastard. But it didn't seem to work.

"I really don't know," I replied with deliberate pomposity. I'd stopped indulging Egerton after only a couple of weeks in the same office, yet still the man persisted. He was either thick-skinned or completely mad; I hadn't made up my mind. In any case, Arsenal's cup chances were of no concern to me.

I rang Melanie's number but she was in a meeting. I was glad to get away from 6pm came around. I said goodnight to Whitehead on my way out. He gave me one of his weak smiles: it lurked behind his thick moustache and failed to light up his eyes.

I thought about Melanie on the way home: was it my imagination or was she writing fewer letters these days and saying less in them? It seemed to me that I used to get one a day. The relationship is changing, part of my mind told me, she doesn't need to write so many letters. Another part of my mind told me: she's starting to love you less. But she'll deny it if you confront her with it. She'll deny it and deny it then one day she'll say you were right and she doesn't love you any more.

While I was in the kitchen making some tea the phone rang. I put down the knife I was using to slice some lemon and went to get the phone, but it rang off after the first ring. My hand hovered over the handset in case the caller redialed immediately. The apparatus remained silent. I went back to slicing lemon and it rang again. I ran to get it but again it rang off. Someone was having trouble. Then I remembered that a similar thing had happened a week before. Twice in one night the phone had rung off before I had been able to get to it. It could only have rung once on each occasion because my flat is hardly big enough to get lost in. I finished making my tea and sat down on the sofa by the open window. The street smelt of dogs, petrol and fish and chips. I felt on edge.

I wondered if it had been Melanie. I went and got the phone and carried it over to the sofa.

I punched in her number. "That wasn't you, was it, just then?" I asked her when I got through. For some reason my question confused her, even when I repeated it, so I assumed it hadn't been her and we just talked. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yes. Why?" That slight catch was in her voice, the one that meant stop, don't continue with this line of questioning. But I always did.

"You sound a bit funny, that's all."

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes I'm sure. I was fine."

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean until you started the cross examination."

"All right. I'm sorry."

"Yes, but it's so irritating. I'm all right but you make me not all right when you ask so many questions. Don't you see?"

I saw only too well. I had to stop it before she did. "Do you love me?" I asked meekly.

"I'm going," she said abruptly and hung up.

I replaced the receiver and dithered for a minute or two, not knowing whether I should ring her back or not and apologize. I waited five minutes and made another cup of lemon tea, then I pressed the redial button.

"Melanie?" I ventured.

"Yes?" She sounded tired.

"I'm sorry for being a pain. It's just that when I can't see you I don't know what you look like. You could be smiling or frowning but I don't know because I can't see you. Do you know what I mean? Just hearing your voice it's hard to tell if you're all right or not."

"Alex." Her exasperation could be heard in just my name. "Will you stop worrying if I'm all right? It wears me down. OK?"

I agreed and we tried to chat about nothing in particular but I could tell I'd annoyed her and brought the call to an end before I could do any more damage. Later the same evening the phone rang again while I was dozing on the sofa. I stretched out an arm to pick it up but my hand seemed to move very slowly as if in a dream and it rang off before I was able to reach it.

I went to bed hoping a letter would arrive from Melanie in the morning.

Again I was in the bath, luxuriating, possibly dozing, when I heard the letter box. I made to get out but my arms slipped from the sides of the bath and fell into the water with a splash that shocked me out of my torpor. My empty stomach was aching, yearning for food, yet my mouth was dry and slightly bitter. I levered myself out of the bath and didn't bother drying my feet before padding into the hall.

The doormat was clear. I lifted the leather jacket and raised the flap.

Nothing.

Oh shit. This isn't happening.

But it was.

I grabbed my dressing gown from the back of the bathroom door and unsnapped the locks on the front door. I fled down the airy staircase to the communal hallway. There were no letters on the window ledge by the door, where the postman left them if he couldn't be bothered to climb the stairs. There was nothing but a pile of last week's free local newspapers, and a couple from the week before. I opened the door to the street and looked up and down for the postman but he wasn't around. He moved quickly, I knew, but not that quickly. I shivered and stepped back inside.

**B**ack in the flat I conducted a brief, futile search around the hall. I had to have been dreaming: it was the only explanation.

I was shaken from my gnawing displeasure by the phone. I went to go and get it, but to my dismay it rang off. I picked it up and heard the dialling tone.

Losing my temper I threw the receiver back at its cradle. It bounced off and I had to control myself and reposition it more carefully.

As I swayed through the Piccadilly Line tunnels on my way to work I hoped for his sake that Egerton



wouldn't come near me today. The mood I was in, I was liable to twist his unpleasant cheap polyester tie around his furry, animal neck until he choked to death. That way the day, which had started extremely badly, would yield some small pleasure.

The train stopped in the tunnel before King's Cross and the bank clerk in the Oxford Street suit behind me huffed and tutted. I squared my shoulders against his pathetic noises. Such irritability on the part of other passengers was always worse than the wait for the train to go again. I told myself that if he tutted again I would turn round and ask him to be quiet, but mercifully the train moved.

"Good morning to you," Egerton practically shouted as I stepped into the office. He was striding past the door, clicking his fingers purposefully as if they were part of the dynamo which powered his ceaseless activity. He always placed stress on the you. Perhaps he thought because he hadn't yet been smacked in the mouth or taken out by precision bombing that people liked him and his studied eccentricity. They didn't.

I rang Melanie but she said she couldn't talk – too busy. We said goodbye. "I'll ring you later," I said but she hung up and I didn't know if she'd heard me or not. So I rang her back.

"Melanie," I began.

"Alex. I'm busy." She sounded pissed off.

"Are you all right?" I asked anxiously.

"Will you stop asking if I'm all right?" She was pissed off.

"Sorry. Look, I only wanted to make sure you're all right."

"I'm busy. I've got to go."

Again she hung up. I hated being hung up on, but I couldn't possibly ring her again. So I waited. Five minutes. Then pressed redial. This is stupid, part of my mind told me. I knew that was right. It was stupid, destructive, doomed to failure. But I couldn't leave the phone alone when it sat there, saying, go on, use me. Phone her back. You might as well.

"It's me," I said quickly. "Listen, don't hang up. I just want to apologize..."

She hung up.

I had to get up and walk around to try and calm down. But Egerton's animated hand movements between keyboard and phone, and chin and coffee cup, just put me more on edge. I left the office and walked round the block wondering what I could do about Melanie. I couldn't leave things the way they were. I'd upset her and I needed to let her know I was sorry. It wasn't just for my own peace of mind. I needed to know she wasn't angry with me. Maybe it was just for my own peace of mind. But if she was still angry with me, ringing her again would only make her angrier.

When I got back to the office I rang a mutual friend, Steve.

"She's all right, Alex," was Steve's opinion. Then the conversation veered away from Melanie and I formed the impression that Steve knew something he wasn't telling. Something about Melanie.

"Is everything all right, I mean, does she still fancy me?"

"Of course she fancies you," Steve said before once more steering the conversation into some gloomy

sidetrack that seemed to lead nowhere. I allowed myself to be drawn along, as the feeling grew inside me that Steve had placed a particular emphasis on the word fancy, suggesting that yes she still fancied me but that was all and the least of my worries. I wanted to ask him if she still loved me but didn't dare in case the answer was either no or an awkward silence.

When I got home I rang Holly, one of Melanie's friends whom I knew well enough to chat to, and asked her if she thought Melanie still cared for me.

"Of course Mel cares for you," Holly tried to reassure me. I was sure she stressed the verb and once more I was too cowardly to use the word love.

Now I began to convince myself that Steve and Holly were on the same track: they both knew the same thing about Melanie. Maybe it was that she still found me attractive and was fond of me but no longer loved me. Or that she had met someone else or that she had come out. Whatever it was, I worked myself into such a state of anxiety that when the phone rang I found myself virtually paralyzed. I tried to extricate an arm – they were folded around my body and I was rocking gently on the chair – but couldn't and the effort dragged me off the chair and on to the floor.

Meanwhile the phone rang off after only one or two rings.

Who was trying to contact me? If I managed to answer would a familiar voice soothe me and calm my fears or would some malicious interloper take delight in confirming my paranoid fears? I had a strong feeling that the world wasn't as simple as I had always imagined. Not all lives proceeded at the same pace and there were different tracks.

It seemed to me that someone was trying to get through to me but something about me or my flat was blocking them. Something needed to change but I didn't know what.

The phone rang while I was cleaning my teeth. I thought I would just carry on because it would ring off after one ring and I wouldn't get to it. But it continued to ring and I still brushed.

It rang a third time.

I dropped the brush in the bowl and ran through to the other room, reaching for the phone. But it had fallen silent. I picked up the receiver and listened to the dialling tone for a moment.

I drifted off to sleep determined to catch the postman out in the morning. As soon as I heard the alarm I reached across and silenced it then slid out of bed. I stood in the cold kitchen while the kettle heated up, and drank my coffee looking out of the sloping skylight, through which I could see only sky. The dawn was a gentle clash of violets and oranges. The coffee in my cup went down slowly. At quarter to eight I moved into the hall and took up a position two metres from the front door. If the postman came, if the letter box was lifted, if a delivery was made, I would see it. There would be no question that I wasn't fully awake. I squatted and waited, patient in the pursuit of my objective. Nothing happened. I heard someone downstairs lock their door and leave the building. I wondered about Melanie without taking my eyes off the letter box. Did she love me? What would she say in her letter if one should arrive? That she loved me

and I should stop worrying or that I had been right all along and she didn't love me at all?

My haunches tingled with pins and needles then went numb. Straining my ears for sounds with which the postman might betray his approach I began to notice a hum in the flat. Electrical appliances, storage heaters, the immersion, all would no doubt contribute, but it seemed as if the flat itself were alive and trying to tell me something. It was the first time I had sat and listened so intently. Normally I played a compact disc or boiled a kettle, switched channels or ran a bath. At night when I lay still I covered my ears with the duvet.

Now, however, for the first time, I was listening to the flat.

I thought that maybe it was telling me not to take my eyes off the letter box. But I couldn't live like this – watching the letter box every morning.

The humming seemed to acquire a rhythm, a beat, like a clock, as if my flat was in tune with the universe, a quartz clock. The flat was part of the great design. I felt it protecting me, like a mother or the mother's womb itself. I watched the door. The flat hummed. It felt completely right.

Then the flap lifted slowly and the white corner of a letter slid through into the flat. I heard my heart beating faster. The letter pushed the flap open wider and fell on to the doormat. The metal flap fell back with the familiar rattle.

My body was tense, ready to spring. I wanted to open the letter. I realized I was sweating. The flat was still all right. I crawled forward and picked up the letter. It was a bill. I snapped it down on the narrow bookshelf in disgust and disappointment, and some small degree of relief.

The hum receded until it was barely perceptible, as if the flat was satisfied it had demonstrated to me that all was in order. A letter had arrived – although not the one I would have wanted – and I had been reassured that the world was still functioning as it should. Possibly had I not been watching, the letter box might have banged open and shut while some hateful, terrible communication slipped, not into sight, but between the tracks upon which my life ran, into the void I knew I would have to face one day. How many letters waited there for me? How many unanswered phone calls? How many small hands stretched out unseen? How many open mouths and proclamations of terrifying truths which would destroy the lies of the life that had gone before?

As I dressed I debated whether or not to phone Melanie. I needed to speak to her and get that part of my life back on the right track. Derailed it could slip into the space where the letters and phone calls waited. But I left it too late to act: she would have gone to work. I realized I was late myself so grabbed my jacket and rushed out, locking the door behind me.

**T**he morning was crisp with fragmented memories of winter. The promise of spring lifted my spirits. The world went on and it was good.

Half way down the road I felt in my pocket for my travel pass and found it wasn't there. For a moment I considered going on without it and paying a couple of quid on fares. But I could scarcely afford it and

I didn't know what I would be doing after work.

So I turned round and went back.

I unlocked the door and instantly felt the difference. It was like stepping into a stranger's home. The flat was as quiet as death. No humming. I wasn't supposed to be there. I had left for the day and in coming back after only two minutes found myself intruding. I felt as if I had penetrated some membrane in reality. Everything seemed colourless in the weak natural light my windows allowed. I stood stock still in the hall listening but the flat was silent. I began to shiver. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled and gooseflesh crept up my arm.

The volume control on the phone was turned low but when it rang in the stillness of the grey flat it was the shrillest, most frightening sound in the world. My heart faltered. But I wouldn't miss the phone this time. I strode into the living room, wading tearfully through the thick air. I reached the phone and picked it up while it was still ringing. I held the receiver to my ear and listened. The flat had become like a photograph printed in a newspaper and the dots were gathering and re-forming and swarming before my eyes.

"Hello?" My voice was toneless and compressed with the suppression of terror.

A voice said: "Go to the door. Quickly. Go to the door!" The voice was familiar but seemed constricted by anxiety.

I could only obey.

The flat knew. I wasn't supposed to be there so it couldn't protect me. I shouldn't have come back when I did. The flat knew everything but could do nothing to help me.

I stepped into the hall just as I heard the letter box bang shut and a letter fell through on to the mat. Had I not got there in time there would have been no letter; just an empty rattle.

I tore at the envelope, though I didn't need to because I had recognized her handwriting and I knew what the letter would say.

Having crossed over accidentally from one track to another, I was now staring into the space in between.

Just as I had strained the relationship by worrying at it and asking all the wrong questions, so had I concluded now in my own downfall both by making the call and by answering it in time. Too late I realized it had been me also on the other occasions, when I'd hung up to save myself.

From the other room I could hear my own distressed voice on the phone shouting, "No no no!" *It's a bit late for that*, I thought bitterly.

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Nicholas Royle wrote "The Sculptor's Hand" (*Interzone* 32), "Negatives" (*IZ* 35) and "D.G.O." (*IZ* 41), and two of these have since been reprinted in anthologies. Numerous other short stories of his have appeared in a surprisingly wide variety of magazines and books. He lives and works in London.

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# Talking Fowler Language

## Dave Hughes meets Christopher Fowler

It is after nine-thirty in the morning as I arrive at Chris Fowler's enviable townhouse in Kentish Town, irritated by the bus-pass pensioners who have made me late. He is bright and fresh as he opens the electronically-secured door (his cat recently escaped), despite the fact that he has probably been awake until dawn working on his next book, viewing obscure horror movies, watching the sun rise over Tower Bridge, or possibly all three.

I am invited through the narrow hallway to the back of the house, noticing along the way the almost obligatory horror-writer's cream carpet (James Herbert, Clive Barker and Brian Lumley, among others, all share his taste in carpet colour – Herbert once suggested to me it was so that visitors could see there was no blood anywhere!). In the conservatory the survivor of a pair of love-birds sings out of time with Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*, which warbles pleasantly from the modest stereo system in the adjoining room. With tea and biscuits duly served, I begin by asking Chris to describe the early days of his writing career.

Fowler, who sneaked onto the bestseller lists for the first time in 1988 with a horror novel, *Roofworld*, doesn't tell the typical "I-was-pushing-a-pen-in-insurance-and-one-day-I-thought-hey-I-could-write-a-book" kind of story. Born in 1953 to a glassblower, Fowler began his working life as an advertising copy writer, becoming a creative group head at the tender age of 23. By 1979, he had set up "The Creative Partnership," an agency specializing in "entertainment advertising" (films in particular), with longtime associate Jim Sturgeon. As the agency became more and more successful, Fowler began to feel that it was time to pursue a career in creative writing to complement the one in copy writing. The first thing he did was find himself an agent who, he says, he came upon by accident.

"We were filming with George Baker who, at the time, said he was giving up acting to write full time. (This was before 'Wexford', of course.) I asked him if he knew a good agent, he recommended his, and as it turned out he just clicked."

What had Fowler written by that time? "I'd written a couple of novels when I was about 22 or 23 which were deeply bad. I'd also been under contract to Radio 4 to work on a comedy series, during which time I wrote this thing called 'Letters From Home.' It was set in the first world war with a woman living in a country house writing to her boyfriend, Bertram, who was in the trenches in France. You only ever saw one side of the correspondence, and there was always something odd going on at the house, like murders... But a lot of the references were veiled because all Bertram's letters were censored. Also, the letters were 'one out,' so her next one would be sent before his reply so you had this weird thing building up. Anyway, the radio show sucked, but everybody said, 'Why don't you do "Letters From Home" as a book?' Unfortunately, at that time Vivien Stanshall did this thing with Trevor Howard called 'Sir Henry At Rawlinson End' which was kind of similar, so I put 'Letters' on hold. I haven't re-read it, but my agent still really likes it. It's extremely black, though. It actually ends with Bertram being killed the day he is due to come home, but his fiancée doesn't know and keeps sending him things..."

Fowler kept writing, largely due to the fact that in his advertising job the office would pack up at around four o'clock, leaving him lots of spare time. "They used to think if you'd made two good phone calls in a day, you'd done enough."

What he wanted to find for his first book, he says, was a title so sure-fire that it would write itself. He picked *How To Impersonate Famous People*. "I sold it (he clicks his fingers) on nine pages, and it went everywhere. The only problem was I'd set myself up to do the impersonations myself, and I ended up trapped into doing them live on national television... It was just the pits!" Fowler followed the book with *The Ultimate Party Book*, *Urban Guerilla* ("How to survive the flatmate from Hell, stuff like that.") and *One Night Stand*, a "his and hers" point of view of two people who spend the night together. Then, he says, the

bottom fell out of the humour market. Horror, it seemed, was a natural progression.

"I'd always wanted to do something for the *Pan Book of Horror*," he recalls. "So I wrote twelve short stories, and luckily managed to sell it as a collection, *City Jitters*." Was it difficult, I ask, selling a horror collection having had no previous publishing history as a horror writer? Was he helped by the fact that Clive Barker had sold *The Books of Blood*, at around the same time?

"Well, the contract for Clive's stories had literally just been signed, but it was the same publisher as *The Books of Blood*, so I suppose the hunch that they were bought on applied to *City Jitters* as well. Also, my stories were themed and had a very strong linking section, which they liked. They also liked the 'London writer' tag, I suppose."

From *City Jitters*, Chris began work on his first horror novel, *Roofworld*. Was this a reworking or expansion of an earlier idea, or an idea that came to him at the time he needed to deliver a novel?

"Well, you know what it's like being a writer. You have a load of half-baked ideas floating around. At the time I wanted to do this science-fiction book called *Skyline*, which was about an ocean liner that is actually a vessel of the air, travelling around the world in the sky. It was going to be like an adventure-action-science fiction thing." Then, I venture, the bottom fell out of the science-fiction market? He laughs. "Yeah! No, my agent doesn't handle science fiction. I asked her why not and she said [adopts plummy English female voice], 'I don't understand it!' I keep throwing her these science-fiction books to read, but she just gets more and more baffled. I suppose I shouldn't have started her off with J.G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*!" He laughs his "too-boyish-for-a-thirty-eight-year-old" laugh again, then goes on. "So, at the same time I had this roof thing –" ("this roof thing" being his typically modest description of his best selling book to date) – "and I decided to run with that."

Was "this roof thing" written as

straight horror? "Well, I wasn't sure if it was science fiction, or thriller, or horror. Then bits of humour started creeping in, and police procedure, and so on, and that really threw them ['them' being, presumably, his publishers] because they didn't really know what to do with it. It's still a problem, because people always want to put you in boxes, and writers never want to be put in them. I remember Clive Barker giving a great speech at a convention a few years back when he asked why it was that science-fiction and horror writers are accused of retreading the same plot over and over, when it's the mainstream writers who are by far the biggest culprits. You know, you have the university novel, the coming-of-age novel etc., but nobody ever criticizes them for working on a theme." So *Roofworld's* supernatural element was deliberate? "Yeah, I mean, it's implied that a guy turns into an eagle at the end!"

The Americans, however, had trouble with this. All of the supernatural element (and a large amount of the violence) was removed for the U.S. super-market market. "There is an argument that you lose a certain part of your audience as soon as you put in something of the supernatural. I mean, people like you and me are attuned to the idea of mixing the real and the unreal, but many people are unwilling to make the imaginative jump."

How does Fowler help them to make the jump as easily as, say, falling off a building? "Sneak it past them!" he answers with glee. "You lull them into a false sense of security by being ultra-realistic and by putting things in that they can relate to. David Lean said that he disagreed with people who thought *Brief Encounter* was real-life simply because the stars were middle-aged and it had a downbeat ending. He said it was heightened, dramatized real-life, and the reason people accepted it was because it had enough elements of recognition in for people to be able to cope." He pauses to turn the stereo off as Condit finally gets the better of our conversation. "I think that's what you do with a book. You dramatize real life. You put enough grounding there for people to handle, then once you've really locked them in solidly – like Roald Dahl used to do – you can then actually afford to take them the next step. The first draft of *Roofworld* had very little going on street level, but then I realized that you had to have one foot on the ground. That's when the police came into it. And of course British audiences love comedy policemen," he adds; then, on reflection: "I love comedy policemen!"

**A** particularly violent squawk from the surviving half of the pair of love birds threatens to blow the speaker of my tape recorder, so Chris

stops to "remove" the bird whose name, he tells me, is Kevin. Kevin? "We thought, what would be the most mundane names you could possibly give to a pair of African parrots, and we came up with Kevin and Betty!" I privately consider the theory that Betty, now understandably the quieter of the two birds, may well have died of shame.

"So," he says, settling back down and going effortlessly back to the previous point, "I really wanted to get into the supernatural and the strange. I knew I wanted to end with a microlight flying through a snowstorm over London, and that's fairly major league, so the book had to have enough grounding in real life. Which is why, in *Rune*, there are actually three pairs of stars in it, each one serving a function, and each in a different age group. The young ones do the things that young people in London do, the old ones do the actual detecting, and the middle ones fit it all together, like a jigsaw. I wanted *Rune* to be plot-heavy, but narrative-driven. I've never been much of a mood writer. I do read a lot of stuff like that, but as far as my writing goes I've always been much more interested in plot intricacies than mood."

Does that go for short stories as well? "Not really. If you make the plots of short stories too intricate, you end up getting branded kind of a 'Roald Dahl wannabe' and lumped in with authors more interested in writing 'locked room mysteries' like John Dickson Carr's, than in writing about emotion. I prefer writing about people. It's a very difficult balance to attain, and it's why I think Ruth Rendell is such a good short-story writer; she actually makes you care about people in the space of six pages. Very clever."

Does Fowler find that using the same characters, albeit lesser ones, in more than one story speeds up the process whereby readers come to sympathize with them? "Yeah. Also, it kind of repays loyal readership. And obviously it's easier to write about an established character, although a friend recently accused me of cheating!"

I ask if Bryant and May, the "comedy policemen" from *Rune* and a few of Fowler's short stories, are going to be coming back, and he reveals that the book he is currently working on, *Dorkest Day*, is their mognum opus. "I always liked the idea of psychic investigators. Detectives who, like Bryant and May, investigate cases with a supernatural edge. I remember there was a weekly comic around when I was a kid, something like 'Maxwell Hawke, Ghost Investigator And His Trusty Assistant, Jill Adair.' They'd investigate things like 'The Phantom Hound Of Hawksmoor Manor,' which would always turn out to be a dog in phosphorescent paint which an unscrupulous landlord –" The temptation proves

too much. "Scooby-doo-by-doo!" I cry, and he laughs easily. "They were great, but they were always hopeless let-downs."

Suddenly the subject switches back to science fiction. "I'd still like to do a hard science-fiction book," he says. Is this partly an attempt to avoid categorization, though? "I don't mind being considered a horror writer, really. Anything as long as people don't call me a fantasy writer! I went off the idea of being a fantasy writer when I was forced to spend the evening in a roomful of Texan women who wrote about unicorns. They all have maps in the front of their books!" But doesn't Chris have a fantasy/horror crossover story lurking in his mind somewhere? "The closest I'll probably come to it is with 'Spanky,'" he says, a trifle alarmingly for so early in the day.

So what, I ask cautiously, is "Spanky"? "It's sort of 'A Boy And His Demon.' A maladjusted suburban kid conjures up a demon which is a direct reflection of his own dark nature. The demon helps the kid solve all his problems, but having solved them, won't go away. It behaves as the boy's alter ego and sets about destroying not only his life but also his town, and ends up by following him to London and turning him into a murderer. It can be seen either as a dark fantasy, a completely supernatural comedy-thriller, or alternatively as something much darker whereby the boy is actually mentally ill – there is no demon, it's just the dark half of his personality shining through."

**H**e goes on to outline future plans for comic collaborations with a mutual friend, sequential artist John Bolton. With all these projects, a background in television (Fowler wrote early drafts of the TV mini-series *First Born*), the recent sale of the film rights to *Roofworld* and *Rune* (and having himself adapted Margaret Bingley's celebrated novel *The Waiting Darkness* as a screenplay), I comment that Fowler is lucky to have so many formats at his disposal. Does he, however, find that it is difficult to choose a format for an idea? "Well, ideally, I'd like to sit down and write a screenplay to go with every book I write, because I think that's a very good way of visualizing where an idea should be placed."

If, then, in an ideal world, he was able to write a story both as a novel and a screenplay, which, I ask, would he tackle first? "I'd write the book first," he replies without hesitation. "With a book you get the depth. You can put the characters' thoughts in. With a film all you're seeing are the peaks of their activity, ie the bits that translate into action, and hopefully you'll understand the character from his or her actions. An awful lot of films



don't work because you can't visualize the characters' lives before or after the film. Sid Field said that film is a window into a room where there is activity going on all the time, and for ninety minutes you're seeing through the window to the activity. To a certain extent the same must apply to a book. The characters have to have a past life, as well as a projected future life outside of the scope of the book. And if, as the writer, you can't visualize what the character is going to be doing after the last page of the book, or the last reel of a film, how can you expect your reader or audience to? That's probably why a very ordinary, mediocre film like *Home Alone* can become such a phenomenal success — kids Macaulay Culkin's age were going to see it over and over again, because they completely related to him, to the point of treating him as a childhood friend."

Does he think that, if he were to write the screenplay before the book, he would be in danger of simply writing a "novelisation"? "Yeah. You see the biggest problem with English screenwriters is that they're lazy, in the sense that a lot of them are very 'Prima Donna'-ish about rewriting. I've heard writers boast, 'Oh, they went with the second draft,' and I don't think you should do that. You should go with the sixth or seventh draft."

I agree. So, is it really a boast? "Well, it shouldn't be. Rewriting does strengthen your work, even if you really really don't want to do it. You will improve it by rewriting it. That's the benefit of having a good editor. It's why the BBC were always traditionally so good, because they had the best script editors. They forced new writers to think very hard indeed about the smallest details, ideas and characters."

So how does Fowler get on with his editors? "I've been with the same editor now for three books," he says. "She's terrific. She just forces me to rethink things, and she's usually right. You really do need a ruler across the knuckles sometimes! That's why I think writers like Jonathan Carroll are so great, because their minds are extraordinarily unusual. He's like a 'white magical realist' [an attempt at categorization, there? tut, tut!] who uses very universal emotions, and he's got a very rich but untapped area which he's just mining more and more. They say the most successful people are those who do the same thing over and over again all their lives because they get better and better at whatever that is." In theory, at least.

**S**o what is after *Rune*, recently published in the UK in paperback (and incidentally Fowler's last book for Century Hutchinson/Arrow following his recent move to Macdonald/Futura)? "Well, next there's *Red Bride*. It's based on the true story of a friend of



Photo of Christopher Fowler copyright © Seamus A. Ryan, 1991

mine's brother. He married a girl he met after six weeks, who then turned out to be the most evil woman in the world, and destroyed his entire life. It took him years to get a divorce, even though it turned out she was wanted as an accessory to murder in Canada! Eventually she was actually extradited by, well...Mounties, I suppose!

"Also, there's a whole thing in it about mutual trust. No relationship can ever exist without mutual trust, and what I wanted to do was write a story about a man who fell in love with a seemingly supernatural woman who may or may not be out to cause him the greatest harm, with their relationship building up around him having to give up almost everything for her, based entirely around trust. I also felt that with just two main protagonists, I could develop the characterization more, rather than saying, 'Ooh, I know, let's do another book where there are hordes of people running around London!'"

One of the other reasons for writing *Red Bride* was that he wanted to write about "the worst wedding ceremony in the world. I had this image of a man marrying a woman against her wishes, and everyone being in on it. So when the priest asks if anyone knows any just cause why they might not be married, she says, 'Yes! Get me out of here!', at which point she's prevented from leaving. So I had this odd image, and in the book it takes place on a beach in a thunderstorm. There's a hurricane coming, and all the chairs and hymn books are being blown away, and there's this woman screaming that she doesn't want to be married, and the vicar's been paid to marry her whatever she says because he's been told she's mad! And that kind of pays off the audience's expectations, because I'd been building to this scene which I'd perceived would be enjoyed and remembered. So whatever I made the story after that, however I solved the mystery or whatever, I've paid my

dues to the audience in some respect by paying them off with the title *Red Bride*."

With most of his work being in the supernatural area, Fowler is certainly in a position to switch subtly to the mainstream by writing a novel which appears to be supernatural but in fact deliberately lacks that element, more in the style of established horror writer Stephen Gallagher's *Down River* (which played both as a mainstream thriller and a horror novel) than the infamous Maxwell Hawke and His Trusty Assistant Jill Adair. Would he write such a book?

"I don't think so. I would never mislead the reader in a way that breaks the unwritten rules of the genre. In the same way that in crime writing you don't introduce an extraneous element to solve a mystery I would equally not use a supernatural device as a titillation and pay it off with a naturalistic solution. Well," he corrects himself, "not unless there was a very good reason for doing so." He picks up on my reference to Gallagher, however, to add: "I liked *Down River*, but by far my favourite of Gallagher's books is *Valley of Lights*. There was a scene, where the cop is out wandering in the canyon, when I actually remember being physically chilled..." The way he emphasizes the final word has much the same effect on me.

Turning the tape over while transcribing the interview, I find Chris relating the nub of one of his favourite cartoons of all time, wherein an elderly man has rung for the butler, and somebody has appeared at his door dressed as a gigantic rabbit in a wizard's costume with a speech balloon saying, "It's me, sir, Larkins. We're having a bit of a time below stairs!" At this point, it seems, uncontrollable laughter gets the better of our interview mock-seriousness, and it is time for a final point:

With short stories, novels, graphic novels and screenplays all to be written, how does Fowler decide which idea to work on next? His answer is simple. "If I get a block on something, I go and work on something else. So right now, on *Darkest Day*, I'm at a point, about sixty pages in, where I need a new event to trigger off the next section of the book. I haven't got it yet," he says brightly, "so I'm doing a short story!"

And for Christopher Fowler, it seems, it really is that easy.

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**Editor's Note:** More readers' letters appear on page 32 of this issue.

## Interaction

Continued from page 5

title. Short of visiting your offices, what was I to do? I recrossed the Channel bootless.

Home again, my mailbox was stuffed with wonders including our object d'discussion, *Aboriginal SF* #28, the critique of which I will deliver without further word wankage. I would be flattered, incidentally, if any of these thoughts ever found the authors concerned.

"Infinite Assassin": Second best story in the issue. I think Stanley Schmidt of *Analog* might have bought this one as well. It was one of the best short stories I've read this month. (I read eight different short-story magazines, only two of which are small press, so please don't devalue this compliment. It is heartfelt.)

"The Nilakantha Scream": Number three for the issue. Solid, quality, professional.

"Ten Days that Shook the World": Here's something I could write volumes about. Darrel Schweitzer printed one of my letters about British fiction in *Weird Tales* #300. This story is a perfect illustration of my points. Knowing full well that it is bad form to criticize another writer, I will speak as generously as possible.

Sir, I hacked through that pile of garbage in the hopes that buried somewhere at the end was a jewel of redemption. No such luck.

Any reader that could enjoy that baldersdash and the glowingly American Stephen King pastiche, "Hamelin Nebraska," is either about to attain nirvana or completely numb from the neck up. On request, I will explain, at nauseating length, why the plot offended me so much, why the writing style itself was like watching the author masturbate and why Kim Newman should be prosecuted for slander. But suffice to say, it is stories such as this one that make any Provincial release of *IZ* unpractical.

"Song of Bullfrogs, Cry of Geese" represents the missing link between infuriatingly sarcastic, gratuitous bullshit like "Ten Days..." and the glorious, diamond-tipped produce of Egan, Brown, Kilworth and McAuley.

Please forgive the mean-spirited tone of that commentary. My only defence is that I am vulnerable to fiction, and "Ten Days..." was the literary equivalent of a root canal, sans anesthesia. It left me just the teeniest bit livid.

"Gene Wars" was no less poetic in its efficiency. Mr McAuley cut right to the good stuff — an dat's da way we likes it here — George Eliot be damned. It is the exposure to minds such as this that validates (indeed, raises to superiority) the sf genre. My sincere

compliments to the author and congratulations to the editor. Gentlemen, bravo.

One final comment on the fiction. I believe that Kilworth's story "Hamelin Nebraska" would succeed on the big screen. I suggest that he submit a screenplay to somebody in that business, maybe Castle Rock Entertainment Inc. ATTN: Mr Stephen King. I dunno. But the tale is crying out for celluloid translation. To deny it would be a crime of the most odious neglect. The only breach of authenticity I caught in the entire narrative was a reference to Boy Scouts cooking sausages on sticks over a camp fire. Garry, old hoss, we call them "hot dogs" over here, quite exclusively. Otherwise the dialogue and voice are perfect Yankee. Kudos, accolades and high fives.

The art supplied by Mark Harrison was wonderful. Babes in the bush seems to be his preferred subject. No complaints here! I also congratulate Mr Ryan for his brave decision to include the "nude" on page nine. The U.S. is a tad backward in terms of the public celebration of feminine beauty... (shrug). Gorgeous work, sir!

The interview with David Wingrove was fascinating, if characteristically long-winded. Nick Lowe has simply got to give up the amphetamines — and the Smurf suit. That hyper-active, cutesy voice nearly drowned out his brilliant insights. The guy is smart, really smart — but wound up tighter than Roger Daltrey's hair curlers. But seriously, guys, you're lucky to have him.

All I can say about the book reviews is that the reviewers should snag a couple hits off Lowe's lunch leftovers. Somewhere along the line they've gotten the word "review" mixed up with the word "criticism." Guess which term I have absolutely no use for.

Sterling's "Cyberpunk in the Nineties" was illuminating, a veritable education pill. Thank you. It's easy to see why Sterling's columns have been so well received over there. He's good.

Thus endeth my comments. Sadly, I do not wish to subscribe to *IZ*. Although eighty percent of what I read in *Aboriginal SF* #28 was exceptionally sharp, the experience with "Ten Days..." brought home the difference between American and English culture like an iron fist on my balls. I vibrate with revulsion even now.

As a lover might say, (sniff) "We're just too different." Obviously, the split started a couple a hundred years ago, but I think it's reversing. Guys like you and Ryan and Schweitzer and Dozols are effecting the change. Salute.

Personally, I'd love to see *Interzone* published here, but I just don't think it would fly financially (your rates for one thing!). In any case, to you and your organization, nothing but the best.

James T. Hughes III  
New York



"Yeah, why?"  
"Just lissen —"

And so, several hours later, all tricked out, we prepared to breach our own force's defences.

It was dark, and Benny Yoyodyne, slowest of the slow, was on duty guarding the gangway. I was wearing the S.P. armband, harness and nightstick, and had my sidearm strapped on. Pig was in cuffs.

"Halt!" said Yoyodyne, brandishing his rifle like some Annapolis frosh. "No one's permitted to disembark."

"It's okay, Benny. They just need Bodine on shore for his court-martial tomorrow."

Yoyodyne lowered his gun and scratched under his cap. "Court-martial? Gee, I'm sorry to hear that. What'd he do?"

"You know the soup we had last week? The one that tasted so grungy? He pissed in it. They discovered it when they saw the distinctive urine corrosion in the kettles. The Captain had seconds, and nearly died."

Yoyodyne turned six shades of green. "Good Christ! what a — a pig!"

"C'mon, Bodine, it's time to meet your fate."

Pig started struggling. "No, no, I won't go, don't make me, General LeMay will hang me by the balls!"

Yoyodyne prodded him with the rifle. "Quit fighting, and take it like a man. You can do at least one noble thing in your miserable life."

Pig straightened up. "You've made me see the error of my ways, Benny. C'mon, Tom, I'm ready now."

I marched Pig down the ramp to the dock. He exuded such an air of holy martyrdom that I found myself almost feeling sorry for him.

As soon as we rounded the corner of a warehouse, Pig unsnapped the shackles from his wrists and collapsed atop a barrel, racked by laughter.

"As Bugs Bunny would say," I commented, "'Ehhh, what a maroon!'"

"He really thought I was like all reformed in an instant. Jesus, some guys deserve the Navy. Let's hit the road, Jack Ker-oh-wack!"

**I**t was a sweet warm July evening, we were instantly and unforgivable A.W.O.L., and the King was playing the next night about a hundred miles to the south. Uncle Sam and the rest of the western world was pausing like a punchdrunk fighter between the penultimate and final round in a senseless slugfest, a brief moment of mocking peace, to have his mouth spritzed and the blood wiped from his brow, before plunging back into the fray with the pug-ugly, cauliflower-eared Papa Nikita and his robotic Commie hordes.

I had never felt more alive, nor ever would.

Kiel was crawling with S.P.'s and M.P.'s (S.&M.P.'s one and all, fer shure), striding imperially among the crowds of refugees, black-marketeers, N.A.T.O.-deputized civilian cops and homeless war-orphans, all Dondi-eyed in rags and viscous as lampreys as they tried to attach themselves to Pig and me as unlikely saviours. The kids were dressed in Carnaby Street rags collected by Swinging London matrons and debs. Polka-dotted caps, paisley shirts, striped trousers. Fab gear.

Pig and I had to dart from shadow to shadow, down

rubble-filled alleys, into doorways that were all that remained of the buildings they had been attached to, and up stairs leading to nowhere to avoid getting orphan-mobbed or cop-trammelled. Using the moon, we worked our way south, to the outskirts of the city. On the autobahn, we were lucky enough to hook a ride with a camo-decorated canvas-backed Mustang-model truck heading Hamburg-ward.

The driver was a blonde English lieutenant named Jane "Sugarbunny" Lane. Her cuddly co-pilot was a dark-haired Romanian exile with the handle of Viorica Tokes, now also a member of the British armed forces. Ribbons from a double handful of campaigns: the Congo, Panama, Algeria, Finland, Manchuria... Experienced, these two! Been in more theatres than Hope, Burns and Berle combined. The gals, it developed, were also illicitly on their way to the Presley show, having wrangled the assignment of delivering the truck's contents to the big D.P. camp outside Hamburg.

Viorica reached across my lap to crack the glove compartment and liberate a bottle of Swedish vodka, which Pig immediately and immoderately snatched away. I flipped on the truck's radio, tuning for the N.A.T.O. station, which, once found, proved to be broadcasting a bland diet of anti-war tunes. Streisand singing "A Pox on Marx (And Lenin Too)." Barry Sadler with "The Day We Took Moscow." Dionne Warwick doing the Bacharach tune "Do You Know the Way to Riga Bay?" You dig, I'm sure. I snapped it off.

"So what kind of mercy mission is this?" asked Pig after a swig, squeezing Sugarbunny's thigh as she drove. To ease the crowding — the door lever was pushing my service revolver into my hip — I placed my arm around Viorica, whose accented English I found entrancing.

"Is that a billygoat club pressing my hip, or are you just being glad to see me?" the Romanian babe responded, sending Pig into gales of vodka-scented laughter. When Bodine's snorts tapered off, I repeated his question, rephrased.

"Yeah, what's in the back? Blankets, medicines, powdered eggs?"

Sugarbunny smiled. "Something even more vital. Propaganda. Namely, comics."

My heart nearly stopped. "American?" I asked, not daring to hope. "New?"

Viorica nodded. "Americanski comics, yes. And very much recently up-to-date."

"Stop the truck right now." Sensing the urgency in my voice, Sugarbunny did as I asked. In less time than it takes to tell, I was back in the cab with a shrink-wrapped bundle in my lap. I couldn't believe my luck. This whole crazy misadventure was starting to remind me of an episode of Hogan's Heroes. The one where Hogan talks the idiotic camp commander Gerasimov into letting him and the boys borrow a truck to deliver some beets to the borshst factory and they make a sidetrip to blow up the tank factory, along the way pulling a truckload of beautiful female Young Soviet Pioneers out of a ditch.

With trembling hands I ripped the shrink-wrapping off.

The Fantastic Four had been enlisted on the Middle-Eastern front. The sight of the Human Torch



zipping through Red Egyptian jets, hot metal splattering above the Sphinx, was just what I needed to remind me of the United States media machine I had left behind. The Invisible Girl fell in love with a handsome Israeli soldier, and the Thing called "Clobberin' Time!" on a bunch of Russian generals. Meanwhile Superman was busy in the Pacific, lifting entire Commie aircraft carriers out of the sea and dashing them down off the coast of sleepy and ostensibly neutral Japan, inadvertently causing a tidal wave which he then had to outrace before it washed over the ruins of Tokyo. And there was more. The Flash picked up General Westmoreland and rushed him across China just in time to meet Chiang Kai-Shek. The Submariner in Australia, Captain America in Tibet, Green Lantern in French Indochina...

**S**o engrossed had I become that I barely noticed when the truck pulled off the road, into the grounds of an abandoned farm.

"Dibs on the barn!" yelled Pig, pulling Sugarbunny by the hand toward that relatively unscathed structure full of mouldering but comfortable and soon-to-be-rolled-in hay, leaving me and Viorica to sack out in the ruins of the farmhouse. We unrolled some bedding in the angle of two standing walls and a bit of roof. The air was effervescent on our bare skins, the stars jealous of what they saw. After sex, she told me a little about herself.

"I survive conscription work in Soviet munitions factory at Timisoara, until I can take no more. I sneak across the border of my soon-to-be-ex country then then journey through all of Yugoslavia to Adriatic, dodging all kinds of bad men, and swing passage on hobo ship which is sunk off Sicily. For six months I am prisoner of hill-bandits who use me like love-doll. Rescue comes in a big shoot-up with Britishers - Special Forces - who are looking for their kidnapped ambassador but find me instead. I arrive in London just in time for guess what?"

"Not Napalm Night?"

"You bet. Whole city and plenty of citizens burned up by flaming Russian Vaseline. Some kind of big mess."

That about summed up the whole world just then, so we fell asleep.

In the morning we were awakened early by a rooster's arrogant assertion that life was worth living. We tracked him down, found his harem and rustled up some eggs. The girls produced government-issue Tang and Pop-Tarts, and we had a fine breakfast in the ruins of civilization. Pig ate enough for two - horses, that is.

Back on the road we raced over the remaining miles to Hamburg. The tanks and trucks and Jeeps and A.P.C.'s we passed were all heading toward the city; no one was leaving. It seemed the entire European theatre of operations was funnelling into the old Hanseatic city for the big show, their courses bent like rays of light around the King's sun. We saw teams from all three Stateside networks and the BBC. I thought I recognized Walter Cronkite.

"Make me a star!" shouted Pig as we zipped by.

The gals dropped us off in the centre of the war-torn town well before noon. "We've got to get these capitalist colour catechisms to the people who really



need them, boys," said Sugarbunny. "We'll catch you at the show tonight. Thanks for the company."

"Lady Jane," I said, trying my best to sound like jagger, "may I kiss your hand?"

She extended it graciously onto the driver's window. "You coulda had more than that to kiss if you asked," said Pig "Nyuck, hyuck, snurt."

"Pig, it would insult the entire species to call you a sorry example of humanity."

"Heads up for anti-personnel mines," Viorica advised as Sugarbunny shifted gears. "Ivan planted plenty before he retreat!"

Made wary by Viorica's parting words, we picked our way gingerly down the centre of the empty street, two cautious cocks come to Cuxhaven.

"What now?" I asked Pig.

"Get drunk, of course. That was half the reason for going A.W.O.L., remember?"

**W**e found a functioning rathskeller, The Iron Stein, occupying the roofed-over basement of a building that didn't exist any more. Inside, patchily illuminated, various locals mingled with off-duty troops from all nations. A cadre of Canadians consorted with a flock of Kiwis, while a gaggle of Gurkhas slopped swill with a passel of Portuguese. B-girls and con-men lived lower down on the food-chain. Pig and I were liberally supplied with occupation scrip, and we plunked it down on the bar for some of Herr Feldverein's best homebrew.

Pig, on my right, slurped down two boilermakers to my every one, and was soon snoring gently on the bar. I doubted he had gotten much sleep with Sugarbunny. I myself was at the stage where vision is muzzily enhanced, and thoughts flit free as dogs in a Dylan song.

The fellow on my left gradually became the focus of my attention. He was an older man, easily past sixty, but in good shape. Bearded, dressed in a kind of modified safari getup popular with correspondents and other white guys slumming in foreign climes, he radiated an air of melancholy wisdom the likes of which I had never felt before. In my boozy condition, I felt it incumbent upon me to try and cheer him up.

"Mister Hemingway, I presume," I said lifting my glass in mock recognition.

"Sorry, son, he's got the glamour assignment with the occupying forces in Cuba."

I could tell by his voice that he was completely sober, perhaps the only such soul in the room. "You are a writer, though?"

"Yes. *Herald-Tribune*. And you?"

An inexplicable shiver unzipped my spine. Was I misinterpreting his question? And if not, why had he asked such a thing? My uniform was obvious as Senator Johnson's hernia scars, and I had thought none of my bruised karma was showing. I swigged my beer and said, "No, 'fraid not. In another lifetime, maybe, if I hadn't left school..."

He laughed then, as bitterly as I've ever heard anyone laugh. "Another lifetime... You wouldn't want one, believe me."

"And how can you be so certain?"

He grabbed my sleeve and stared me down. "I'll tell you a good story, son, and let you decide."

He let me go, and then began.

"I was eighteen in 1985 -"

I had to interrupt. "Twenty years in the future."

"Your future. Once my present. Now, nobody's future. Anyway, shut up. I don't tell this one often, and might change my mind. I was eighteen in 1985, and a simple soldier. The world I lived in was one you probably can't imagine. You see, in my world the United States and the Soviet Union were both armed to the teeth with atomic bombs. Do you have any notion what those are?"

"Something to do with atoms, I bet," I managed to wise-mouth.

"That's right. Explosive devices that split atoms to unleash unimaginable destructive power. They were invented during World War Two -"

"They were?"

"In my world, yes, they were. And after the war, thousands were manufactured and mounted on rockets -"

"Rockets now," I said. "This is quite a story. I've always liked rockets, but I've never seen any big enough to carry a bomb. A firecracker, maybe."

"Believe me, they can be built big enough to cross continents. Can you picture such a world? Held hostage by two insane superpowers with enough megatonnage to destroy the whole ecosphere?"

Megatonnage? I thought. Ecosphere? A madman's glossolalia... But the putative nutcase ran right past my speculations with his story.

"Well, in 1985 it finally happened. The Soviet premier was Yuri Andropov, a mean bastard, former K.G.B. man. The Russians were losing in Afghanistan -"

"Afghanistan? Didn't the British have something to say about that?"

"The British Empire fell to pieces after my Second World War. They meant nothing. No, the geopolitical scene was strictly the U.S. versus Russia. They were the only players who really mattered. Well, the Russians invaded Pakistan, our ally, where the Afghanistan rebels had their bases. We responded with conventional forces, and the conflict escalated from there. The next thing we knew, the birds were launched, and World War Three had begun."

"I was assigned as a simple guard in the command centre under the Rockies. That's how deadly those bombs were - we had to hide our asses under the weight of mountains just to survive. Well, in the first few minutes of the war - and it only lasted an hour or two - everything went like clockwork. The generals gave the launch codes to the soldiers manning the silos, read the damage reports handed to them, counted up their losses and launched a second batch of missiles in response... But then things began to break down. We were still getting a few visual feeds along the fibreoptics - the whole atmosphere was churning with electromagnetic pulses of course - and the sights that we saw -"

The man began to weep at the catastrophe that hadn't happened yet, and apparently never would. His face was briefly contorted with an intensity of deep emotion. I was rapidly becoming bummed out. This had gone from being a kind of half-amusing, half-draggy conversation with a lively minded liar to a Coleridge-style buttonholing by a certified manic.

**T**ears in his beard, the old reporter pulled himself back together, obviously drawing on some immense reservoir of will. He caught me by the elbow, and I was frozen. His touch had communicated to me the certainty that every word he spoke was the truth as he knew it.

"The carnage was awful. It drove technicians and soldiers alike mad. Nobody had predicted this. There was mutiny, rebellion, firefights and suicides in the command centre, some pushing to continue the war, others to cease.

"I couldn't take sides. My mind was paralyzed. Instead, I dropped my rifle and fled, deeper into the enormous bunker.

"When I came to myself again, I was in a lab. Everyone there was dead, suicides. I slammed the door, locking myself in.

"There was an apparatus there. It was a time machine."

"Jesus!" I shook his hand off and looked around me for help in dealing with this madman, but everyone was busy getting drunk, except Pig, who was still blissfully snoring. I was on my own. "Atomic bombs, rockets, okay, maybe. A time machine, though. Do you expect me —"

"I don't expect anything. Just listen. As soon as I discovered what the device was — an experimental, one-way, last-ditch project that had never even been tried — I knew what I had to do.

"I wanted to live out most of the century again, up to the year the final war had broken out, so I set the machine for seventy years in my past, 1915. I figured I could hang on till my eighties. And the second decade of the century was early enough to start changing things.

"There were spatial settings as well. I put myself in New York. Instant transition, very elegant. There I stood, dressed all wrong, eighteen years old, the tears still wet on my face. But quite certain of what I had to do.

"Very quickly, I established myself as a reporter. It's amazing the scoops you can deliver when the future is an open book. Then I began systematically killing some very important people.

"Einstein was first. He had already published some papers of course, but I staged his death so as to discredit his work as much as possible. Travelling to Switzerland, I carried with me the government-issued poison the lab technicians had offed themselves with. I had grabbed it before entering the wayback. Traceless, efficient stuff. It was no problem to slip some into the coffee Einstein and I shared. I paid a Zurich orphan boy to report to the authorities that the 'Jewish pervert' had died during sex with him. Quite a remarkable scandal. No respectable scientist would touch his theories afterwards with a ten-foot pole."

"Walesa?" I half-heartedly quipped. He ignored me.

"After such an obvious target, I began working through a list of everyone who had had a hand in developing either atomic fission or rocketry.

"Bohr, Lawrence, Fermi, Dyson, Alvarez, Feynmann, Panofsky, Teller, Oppenheimer, Goddard, Sakharov, the Joliot-Curies, von Braun, Wigner, Ley, Dirac — I completely wiped the slate of history clean of most of 20th-century nuclear physics. It was easier than I had ever dreamed. Those people were vital,



indispensable geniuses. And so trusting. Scientists love to talk to reporters. I had easy access to almost anyone. The Army had taught me traceless ways to kill, and I used them once my stock of poison ran out. It was pathetically simple. The hardest part was keeping my name clean, staying free and unimplicated. I visited the victims at night, usually at their homes, without witnesses. I misrepresented my employers, my name, my nationality. Oh, I was cunning, a regular serial killer. Bundy and Gacy had nothing on me, and I eventually beat their score. But for the salvation of the world!"

None of the names he had mentioned meant anything to me, except Einstein's, whom I recalled as a crazy Jewish physicist who had died in disgrace in Switzerland. I had to assume that they were real people though, and had been as pivotal as he claimed. "Why did you have to kill scientists, though? Why didn't you go the political route, try to change the political structures that led to war, or eliminate certain leaders?"

"Too much inertia. The politics had been in place for decades, centuries. The science was just being born. And it was the scientists' fault anyway. They deserved to die, the arrogant bastards, unleashing something they could barely comprehend or control like that, like children chipping away at a dam for the thrill of it. And besides, what difference would it have made if, say, I could have gotten someone different elected as president, or nominated as premier? Would Russia have gone democratic under someone other than Andropov, released its satellite nations, disengaged from Afghanistan? Bloody unlikely. But still, I didn't neglect politics. I reported favourably on the creation of the president's scientific advisory council that started under Roosevelt, and carried favour with its members. I wrote slanted stories ridiculing the notion of funding anything even remotely connected with rocketry or atomic power. Not that there were many such proposals, after the devastation I had wreaked. Of course, I kept killing off as many of the second-stringers as I could who had popped up to take the place of the missing geniuses.

"History remained pretty much as I remembered it, right up till the Second World War. Nuclear physics just didn't have much impact on life until the 'forties. But by the time Hitler invaded Poland, I was certain I had succeeded. There would be no atomic ending to the war. I had staved off the ultimate destruction of the earth.

"Naturally, my actions meant a huge loss of American lives in the invasion of Japan. Hundreds of thousands of extra deaths, all directly attributable to my intervention in history. Don't think I haven't thought about those men night after night, weighing their lives in the balance against those of the helpless civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and, later, every city on the globe. But the scale always tipped the same way. Atomic destruction was infinitely worse."

He was talking almost to himself now, more and more frantic, trying to justify his life, and my incomprehension meant nothing. By my side, Pig had stopped snoring.

"After the war, though, events really began to diverge from what I knew. It all slithered out of my

control. The permanent American presence in a devastated Japan led to stronger support of the Chinese Republicans against Mao and his guerrillas, resulting in their defeat. How could I know though that having the Americans on their Mongolian border would make the Russians so paranoid and trigger-happy? I couldn't be expected to predict everything, could I? The border incident that started your World War Three – a total freak accident! Out of my hands entirely! But what does a little global skirmish mean anyway? As long as there's no atomic bombs. And there's not, are there? You've never seen any, have you?"

I could only stare. He grabbed my shirtfront. "I fucking saved your ass from frying," he hissed. "I'm bigger than Jesus! You all owe me, you suckers. I made your world –"

There was a shot, followed by screams and the sound of clattering chairs and shattering glasses. The time-traveller's hands loosened and he fell to the floor.

Pig Bodine had my service revolver in his shaky hand.

"My Dad died in the invasion of Japan," said Pig. "Bodine," I opined, "I think you've just killed God."

"This is war, man. Why should God get off free?" We split fast from The Iron Stein before anyone could gather their wits to detail us. We found Sugarbunny and Viorica and shackled up in a safe spot till the show, which we thought it would be okay to attend under cover of darkness. After all we had been through, it would have been a shame to miss it.

The Beatles played superbly, especially Pete Best on drums. The whole crowd forgot their J-Day jitters and began to groove. During their last number – a little ditty called "Tomorrow Never Knows" – I began to cry so hard that I missed all of the Supremes' set, and the opening notes of the King's "Mystery Train."

But Presley's singing made my world seem real enough again, and more important than ever before.

After the concert the four of us ambled off hand-in-hand through the nighted streets, lit only by the stars so impossibly high above, where no "rocket" bearing "atomic bombs" had ever trespassed, back toward the truck, now as empty of its four-colour contents as my brain was of plans.

Yet somehow I felt content. "Where to, boys?" asked Sugarbunny. "The future," I said. "Where else?" "Nyuck, nyuck," snuffled Pig. "How about tripping into the past? I'd like to be in that barn again."

"If you get the chance, please don't ever try it, Pig. Living in a world created by a moral idealist is bad enough. One made by an amoral hedonist – I can't even begin to imagine it."

The girls were puzzled. Pig sought to explain by goosing them simultaneously so they squealed.

"Could it be worse, Tom? Could it be? Snurg, snarf, hyuck!"

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Paul Di Filippo makes a welcome first appearance in *Interzone* with the above story. Like the late great H.P. Lovecraft, he lives in Providence, Rhode Island; and, like the great William Gibson, he published his first story in the short-lived *Unearth* magazine in 1977. However, he made his real sf debut in 1985-86, with several sales to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and other publications.

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# Mutant Popcorn

## Film Reviews by Nick Lowe

**T**hink very carefully. Perhaps you've noticed something and dismissed it from your thoughts. Remember when the electric man came to change the meter? Did you watch him? Did you hear him leave? Look under the stairs. Take a screwdriver and a torch. Have you ever seen a junction box like that before? Put your fingertips lightly to the panel. Feels different, right? Not metal, not plastic, but like...some kind of...Shh. Don't be scared. See the screws? Undo that pair at the top. Gently...now swing the cover down. Don't think about the way it seems to...to unpeel, the way the exposed interior sort of glistens. No no, don't touch! Just take a hard breath and point the torch. Oh God. Oh no...

It's okay. Don't worry. I felt like that myself, in the beginning. With me, as with so many, it was the money I noticed first. There I was in the newsagent for a packet of Mentholyptus, and I notice all the change has my own face on one side and a map of the Glasgow Underground on the other (except of course for the new 5ps, which just have Bart Simpson as usual). So to cover my confusion I pretended to browse through a copy of *Angling Times* – only to become slowly aware that all the usual pictures of beaming lads holding big ones in both arms seemed to have had the eyes air-brushed out and the catches disturbingly retouched by some brilliant but warped practical joker...After that, it didn't take long. As soon as you start to notice, the signs are all around, have been all year. John Major. Bryan Adams. The letters of Robert Heinlein. The Barclays ad about the Russian floating eye clinic. People actively wanting to reelect George Bush. Communism lets go, says goodbye, and tells everyone it loves them. Yes: the Joe Chip penny drops. I can't say when, and I don't know how; perhaps it was an asteroid hit, or the bombs all went off, or maybe the whole world caught a global brain virus off the trailers for *Home Alone*. The one certain thing is we're ALL DEAD and 1991 is where we've been stuck ever since: not quite heaven, not altogether hell, but in no way confusable with the real world we left behind.

For a kickoff, look at the movies. If ever there was a year when the graves opened and the dead returned to judgment, 1991 was surely it. Sequels spew forth to mouldering half-memories from five, or seven, or seventeen years gone: *Predator*, *Highlander*, *Terminator*, *Godfather, FX*, *American Tilt*, even *The Rescuers*, with yet more Aliens and *Star Trek* soon to come. The biggest film of the year – in a considerable sense, the only film of the year – costs all the money in the world to make, is pointedly subtitled *Judgment Day* for reasons only scantily justified in the text, and takes us back to an impossibly bigger and brighter reenactment of one of our happiest cinema memories in life. Even the new pictures were mostly one way or another a celebration of the dead, with lots of insipidly sterilized period puddings, thin-flavoured and meatless like grave-food. The nearest thing to a decent box-office scrap we were promised all year was the soggy *Robin Hood* affair, which in the event petered out in one's slithering off into North American miniseries and both's turning out to be a complete fistful of cobbles. More startlingly, not one studio film premiered in the US in 1991 seems likely to generate a sequel of its own. The one film of the year likely to exert any influence over the way things are done hereafter is, once again, *Terminator 2* – which seems to have shown that sackloads of cash, known talent, and proven subjects pay better dividends than economy, new blood, and novelty.

But above all, of course, it was another year when screens were positively spilling with fun dead guys and homely pop eschatology, from *Truly, Madly, Deeply* to *Dead Again* and the reborn *Bill & Ted*. I used to think this pestilence of cheesy metaphysics was just another outgrowth of the narcissistic pseudospirituality that passes for humane depth in the postpolitical nineties – where the official termination of history and the eradication of all recognized forms of evil (except of course for the destruction of the rainforest, which we can reverse if we all close our eyes at once and believe very hard in the contagious power of pure

goodness) permit us to turn our gaze inward, away from the fact that most of the world is doing worse and worse as a direct result of our solution of all world problems, and towards the things that really matter like cuddling our kids and making our peace with our parents. As it turns out, there's a much simpler explanation. We're dead interested in death because secretly we know: we're here, trapped in this unconvincing nowhere time, forever.

**S**o you can see why it took so long to get Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder* finally off the shelf and on to our native screens. Here, at last, is the film that dares to tell the truth about 1991. (I'm assuming in what follows that anyone seriously interested in not knowing the ending of this film will by now have found it out. Since the ending is such a miserable letdown anyway, it probably even allows a more uncluttered pleasure in the storyline if you know all along that in the end the loose ends haven't the least intention of knotting up.) Could there be a perfectly rational explanation for all the weird set pieces that have been coming at us lately – like the Gulf War, Bozzer saving the world, and all those Americans going willingly to see *Dead Again*? Are we (a) dead; (b) the victims of a sinister military hallucinogen and subsequent conspiracy of coverup; or, as we come increasingly to suspect as the plot unfolds, (c) something yet stranger, more sinister, and unimaginably more complex than both?

Uh, well, as it turns out, the answer in the movie at least is actually (a) – which means that the final scene is the only bit that's real, and the whole of the rest is more or less arbitrary confabulation from the vantage of good old Owl Creek Bridge. Cue massed groan from audience and enraged vandalism of screen. Whether there was ever anything at all in the rival headbender scenario, according to which Tim Robbins and his chums mostly stifled one another in an attack of the psychochemical loopies, is left exasperatingly untouched – a solution not measurably helped by some strange recutting of the final section by the time the picture finally made it to UK screens. And why



the hero's postNam afterlife should take quite the form it does, and especially why he should chuck his family over for Elizabeth Pena just because of the uncanny way her blouse keeps falling open, is never even on the narrative agenda.

But if you can live with all that, a lot of what comes before is undeniably evocative and haunting — less, perhaps, for the splashier effects and images (good though those often are) than for the eerie twists and shunts of nightmare logic, the repeated sense of breaking through one crust of reality after another. The creepiest moments in *Jacob's Ladder* are neither the overtly supernatural visions nor the cheerfully gratuitous and overloaded set pieces, but sequences like the stretcher journey through the hospital basement, where the fabric of reality is still just about holding together but something is obviously deeply wrong... Though he'd have nothing but contempt for scriptwriter Bruce Joel Rubin's twee therapeutics and horrendous incapacity for irony, it's not completely inappropriate to invoke the name of Philip Dick here. For most of its length *Jacob's Ladder* has, I think, more of the deep texture of Dick's universe than anything much seen on screen, including the films that have come directly from his work. It's not quite alone in this — last year's unjustly despised *Communion* had a touch of

the same edgy spell — but it's certainly not a fashionable thing to do in Hollywood, and needless to say proved commercial kiss of death. You can easily see why this famously unmade script became, over a decade, its own metaphor, hovering in turnaround limbo between movie life and death long enough for own reality, particularly its carefully ambiguous chronology, to fray impossibly round the edges. (In 1981, it would still have been possible to remain untroubled by questions of period and ageing. But twenty years on from the hero's dateable trauma, the problem of when, if ever, the story takes place is now the first thing that needles.)

There never was much danger of mass box in such finally pointless convolutions of pseudometaphysical plotting — nor, for that matter, in such a uniformly bleak and cheerless texture, not conspicuously relieved by the hapless hero's being finally permitted to follow Macaulay Culkin (are those his own lips? yurgh) up the stairway to heaven in a Dulux radiance of soft-focus golden light. So it's a happy chain of improbabilities that got this far more interesting tryout for *Ghost* made at all in the end; and what embarrassments remain are largely those of the script itself rather than anything in the way it's served by its players and (surprisingly) its director. If it seems at times to be maddeningly tangled in

its own non sequiturs, loose ends, and hopeless inconsistencies, that's maybe because you just haven't learned to make your peace with earthly plot logic and let go. For then, you see, all those pesky devils will turn to angels, and a golden-haired tyke will appear to escort you to a happy place where everything makes kinda sense in a kinda gentler, 1991 kinda way. Then again, of course, you might prefer to go back to the electric cupboard.

(Nick Lowe)

## Tube Corn TV Reviews by Wendy Bradley

**T**hunderbirds is boring. I hadn't expected that.

Like everyone else, I had been waiting impatiently for *Thunderbirds* to reappear in its latest incarnation on BBC2. I too have spent time humming *Da-da-da-DA dododada da-dado-da do DA* any time it was mentioned and reminiscing with people about the Lady Penelope signet ring and the taste of FAB lollies. "Name the Tracy brothers" took over from the seven dwarfs and the seven deadly sins as

the triv question of choice and the air was thick with "Yus milady"s and "F.A.B"s. The music, the merchandise and the catchphrases still bring a rush of memory, but it is not the programme that is remembered but the era; to be nine years old again!

First screened in 1965, there are 32 Thunderbirds episodes, most of which were already available on video for the true fanatic. The merely nostalgic amongst us had to wait until September for the BBC to begin the complete reshowing (there will be a break of indeterminate length over the Christmas schedule but, the BBC assure me, all 32 will be shown in time). The original era shows most obviously in the international power politics: that International Rescue should have a London (and only a London) agent in Lady Penelope is inevitable for a '65 programme, for are we not looking back to that lost age when Swinging London was the centre of the universe? When to be English, particularly aristocratically or distinctively regionally English, was to be the last word in chic. Lady Penelope and Parker between them summed up almost the whole of what anyone needed to know about Swinging London and the Swinging Sixties: the only thing that surprises me about Lady Penelope is that she never acquired a Liverpoolian maid.

But how good was the actual programme? As camp as a boy-scout jamboree when seen through cynical adult eyes, it was also the first real stunt series, that was able to go places and produce effects that were impossible until the era of megabuck movies, by the simple expedient of using models instead of people and topping small mountains on tabletops instead of small countries on big budgets.

The reason, however, that I now find it boring is that it is effectively *The A Team* in terms of shots and plots—hidden identities, do-gooders without motive other than the motive to do good, irrationally villainous villains whose villainy is their sole reason for existence. And corner cutting that even a nine-year-old can identify, the same spectacular shot used over and over to represent a continuing danger, the same resorting to stock film to fill in background, the same oversimplification of danger and power and human relationships into focused perils, black-and-white issues and one-emotion characters. I can take that sort of thing, for a while anyway, provided at least one of the actors is pretty or the scriptwriter has a sense of humour, but when the actors and the scripts are equally wooden, once all the memories have been evoked which are going to be evoked (in the first five minutes, in my case), then there is nothing left but the creeping sense of, well, frank boredom, tinged with regret.

The myth that Thunderbirds promoted — that somewhere there is someone who will come to the rescue — is one of television's central myths, seen not only in *The A Team*, *Knight- rider* and that sort of "fantasy" programme but also now in *The Equaliser* and its ilk, the world getting grittier and more unpleasant and the perils from which ordinary people need to be rescued getting more and more dirty and unheroic. There does not seem to be an equivalent programme with the Tracy brand of optimism today: even the *Ninja Turtles* live in a world which is fundamentally flawed (symptomatically there is the oozing slime which ironically gave them their start in life) rather than, as the Tracys did, in a world which is fundamentally good but where there are occasional adventures to be had in righting wrongs and

rescuing the heroes who push a little too far.

But even the Thunderbirds' black, white and highly coloured view of the world seems to have become muted over time, rather in the way that the Pop Art exhibition at the Royal Academy was disappointing in the light of day. Mid way through the sixties, for me anyway, the world emerged from the gritty black and white realism (of, say, *A Hard Day's Night*) into the multicoloured, primary-coloured world of Pop Art and Carnaby Street. The Thunderbirds on television and *Help!* at the cinema. In the cold light of the nineties the pop art canvases looked smaller, greyer, less vibrant. So do the Thunderbirds. Is this what they mean by growing up? Anyone got a time machine?

(Wendy Bradley)



Thunderbirds (BBC)

# Xenos

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## Interaction — continued from page 22

Dear Editors:

We are a local group interested in SF and Fantasy. Our literary circle is called MILENIUL III. All members are writers and when we have a meeting everybody reads aloud from our personal creations.

But, by misfortune, we don't have access to English and American SF & F literature, because our national coin isn't convertible.

We want to procure and buy some stronger books within this extraordinary literature. In exchange for these books we can offer you one charge of holiday in the Danube Delta, because our town is situated in that beautiful zone.

All of us want to read this kind of book. If you have in your book case any spare magazines or books, we will be happy to receive them. Thank you very much!

**Nicolae C. Arion**

str. 1848, bloc 2, sc G, ap 9  
Tulcea 8800  
Romania

Dear Editors:

IZ's subscription list is only about 2,000 after a decade of publication, but you still attract letters like Paul Bowes's in IZ #52 warning you about the perils of commercialism. Your problem is that you appear to heed such intellectual snobbery.

"Pandering to marketplace values" is another way of saying "writing something which people will pay to read." If nobody's going to read your stuff, why bother? Catering for a small band of people who use expressions like "ne plus ultra" might be to some tastes, but not to mine.

Paul asked if anyone with any sense believes that "we" (his quotation marks) are going to Mars. Perhaps I'm the wrong person to reply, because I have almost no sense at all, but I believe it is highly likely that humans will visit Mars and beyond sometime in the future.

In the same letter column, Joseph Nicholas put forward his perennial argument that humans will never colonize space. It's as if he's never heard of scientific, technological or social progress. Space can be highly profitable, as we've already found out with our weather satellites and communications satellites. It will be even more profitable in other unexpected ways. It won't be necessary to spend vast sums on a mass colonization of space. Send out a few hundred people and they'll be able to make many more, both naturally and artificially.

The exploration and exploitation of space are exactly the sort of things that SF should be about. I'm glad to see that IZ is showing belated signs of realizing

that, though I'm not sure if stories about the entire human race being stuck in a fridge ("The Baryonic Lords" in IZ #48 and #49) are worth more than a muffled titter.

Back here on Earth, scientific and technical progress are leading to the destruction of the old tyrannies. You can't keep people politically oppressed for long once they've seen democrats having a good time on the telly. Our problems, including overpopulation, pollution and poverty, will very likely be overcome by the application of scientific and technological advances in the next few decades. Is this what Paul Bowes means by "the American ideology of technological optimism"? I fail to see why he should attribute it to one country, because it is worldwide, fortunately. We're not all miserable technophobes, thank goodness.

**Robert Muir**

*Blackpool*

Dear Editors:

Paul Bowes's letter in IZ 52 has to qualify as the most open intolerant piece ever to grace *Interaction's* pages. If I were to sum it up in a few words then they would have to be technophobic and luddite, even verging on the offensive.

Mr Bowes seems to rather cut the ground from under himself in his very first paragraph when he describes messrs Baxter, Brooke, Banks etc as "already popular, award-winning and best-selling." If they are so successful, then surely they must be doing something right? Apparently Mr Bowes thinks not: they have dared to be upbeat, they have sold their literary souls in the pursuit of lucre, they have, horror of horrors, been technophilic. Not controversial? Has Mr Bowes read Iain Banks's *The Use of Weapons*? — the sting in the tale almost made me physically ill. He could even try Stephen Baxter's "George and the Comet" from the same issue of IZ as his letter: the little twist there should still raise an eyebrow or two.

There is no law that says that British writers must be downbeat, other than the one that Mr Bowes and his ilk are trying to perpetuate. I can enjoy a downbeat story; I personally think that Nicola Griffith is *Interzone's* best discovery and "Song of Bullfrogs, Cry of Geese" remains my favourite IZ story of the year, yet I can derive equal enjoyment from an upbeat story or a technophilic one (they aren't necessarily the same thing). Success appears to be a no-no as well, "pandering to market place values," to quote directly, or is the problem that the *Newest Wave* isn't pandering to Mr Bowes's own particular values?

"The American ideology of technological optimism" also comes in for criticism — it continues to amaze me how many technophobes actually read sf. There is nothing wrong with being a technophile; we don't have to buy our copies of *New Scientist* in brown wrappers yet, nor are our children seized by social workers in dawn raids. Technophilia isn't even a native American fetish — the British were the original technophiles, we took the Industrial Revolution around the world in a crusade that took less than a century and the closet technophobes only achieved their position of power after the Great War; probably due directly to the media and its "Look what the scientist has brought us, children!" attitude that didn't peter out until well into the Fifties. Times are changing, the children of the late Fifties and the Sixties are coming into the market, we grew up on *Tomorrow's World* and *Horizon*, we cut our teeth on the Apollo missions, graduated into the Information Revolution, is it any wonder that our stories are different from those who have gone before?

As for never going to the stars, for turning inwards, Mr Bowes simply displays the inability to think in the long term that is the curse of this country. WE WILL GO TO MARS. I don't know when, I hope I live to see it, but we will go, because orbital space is too valuable to abandon and the technology to exploit that usefulness inevitably gives us the ability to go to Mars. The stars are more difficult, but the future is a long time and there are too many possibilities to lay down the absolutes that Mr Bowes seems fond of. I would suggest he finds a copy of Michael P. Kube-McDowell's *The Silent Pools* and considers what that novel has to say on the psychology of those who stay and those who challenge frontiers.

Mr Bowes disparaged the average fan as the "proverbial computer programmer," and this I have great pleasure in taking personally. I am a computer programmer, I am an engineer and proud to be an engineer: I can't afford to be adolescent in my attitudes; if I make a mistake in my work it could send an airliner into the ground and kill hundreds at a time, but that won't happen, because even if I do make a mistake others will catch them, we are necessarily professionals, necessarily adult. If the average fan is a software engineer, than I'm proud to know him.

**David Gillon**  
Rochester, Kent

Dear Editors:

I must admit to feeling somewhat cheated when I found that *Interzone* no. 51 was in fact *MILLION* no. 5. But I must now admit to having enjoyed the issue more than some past issues

Concluded on page 70



# Virtuous Reality

## Brian Stableford

*I kept no reckoning of time or place, and the stars of my fate faded from heaven, and therefore the earth grew dark and its figures passed before me like flitting shadows, and among them all I beheld only — Morella.*

[Edgar Allan Poe, "Morella"]

I will admit, if you like, that I am old-fashioned, or even that I was born out of my time. But you must understand that to someone like me, who learned to love bound books more than textplates, holovideo shows and Virtual Reality synthetapes, the ideas and values of ancient times are every bit as real and present to my mind as the ideas and values of the 23rd century, and not one whit less worthy. That is the greatest gift of intelligence, technology and civilization: that humans are not bound to one moment or to one place, but have the power to understand and embrace the alienness of elsewhere and elsewhere.

I am not a product of perverted education, to be reckoned an obsessive freak; my co-parents certainly encouraged my antiquarian interests but they did not force their collection of antique books upon me, nor did they inhibit my use of modern communications technology. I consider myself to be a self-made man, and I do not think that there is anything regrettable in the fact that many of my attitudes and emotions are made in the image of a characteristic mindset of the distant past.

It is difficult for modern people to get to grips, intellectually and imaginatively, with the notion that the mental life of our ancestors was very unlike our own, but it is true. The fact that we continue to employ the same words in different contexts helps to obscure and conceal these differences, but there is not the slightest doubt that what the people of the 19th and 20th centuries meant by "love" or "passion" was something much richer, more profound and more vivid than what those words now signify to most of us. I have always taken pride in my ability not merely to comprehend but also to feel the meanings which such words as those once had, but have no more. The people of those distant times were far less cerebral than the common herd of today, and their emotions had a power to excite and consume which would seem utterly alien to all but a few inhabitants of our more solemn and orderly era.

When I say that I came to love Morella, therefore, I do not mean to refer to the kind of calm affection which my neighbours presumably feel for the various members of their organic households.

These days, the statistics assure us, the average American male has three point six wives at any one time, and — assuming the average rate of turnover in the various households with which he associates himself — can expect to have ninety-three point five wives altogether, in the course of a lifetime which includes the usual two rejuvenations. As rejuvenation technology improves and child licences become more difficult to obtain these figures are likely to increase steadily, and this will undoubtedly make monogamy even more unfashionable in times to come. But my love for Morella was of an older and finer kind which could not tolerate the thought of any alliance save for monogamy.

My soul burned for Morella, with a fire which was painful and yet exalting; and I knew from the very first that fate had bound us together, exclusively and inextricably.

Morella was perfectly content, in the beginning, with the kind of arrangement which I proposed to her. She was only seventeen years old — I was thirty — but she was possessed of great intelligence and an astonishing intensity of concentration. She had already become estranged from her co-parents, who considered her unco-operative and antisocial. (I believe that this will increasingly come to be seen as a normal pattern as child licences become more difficult to obtain; the solitary children of groups of eight or ten parents will inevitably come to see themselves as aliens within their own homes, and will increasingly retreat — as Morella did — into the synthetic worlds of Virtual Reality whose counterfeit experience becomes more convincing and more varied with every year that passes.)

Morella and I were, I think, far more similar in our interests and inclinations than we seemed to outside observers. She had no particular love for books before I met her — her ability to handle encoded text was in no way impaired, but she employed it in a strictly functional capacity — but the Virtual Realities which she most loved to visit were those which set out to re-create the pre-cinematic world in all the fullness of its primitive and magical glory. We educated one another in the sharing of our passions; I taught her the processes of conjuration by which the thread of ancient words could be spun into a wondrous garment of mental experience; she showed me that even the relatively crude Virtual Reality simulations which were then in common use were also

worthy collaborators with the human imagination.

Although we preferred to look through different windows, Morella and I loved to look out upon the same lost world, and we were happy to talk endlessly about our experiences, enriching one another's understanding with our complementary accounts. I am convinced that her love for me was, in the beginning and in its fullest bloom, as beautifully and as powerfully anachronistic as mine for her.

We shared our experiences as fully as we could. Although she never became a habitual reader, she was delighted to listen while I read aloud to her the poetry of bygone ages. I, in my turn, would partner her in those adventures in Virtual Reality which were designed to be collaborative. These were, of course, new and few in those days, but we readily invested in more sophisticated equipment as and when it became available. I had always shunned synthetic visual and tactile experiences before, thinking them too crude to interest one as sensitive as myself, but it soon came to seem, even to me, that when Morella and I donned our co-ordinated data suits we were as closely united as we were when we caressed one another in the flesh.

To Morella, I have no doubt, setting forth together into some Alternative World was the most perfect form of our intimacy, and the real core of our union. Together, we roamed the picturesque (and, it must be admitted, somewhat impressionistic) streets of Dickens' London, Baudelaire's Paris and D'Annunzio's Rome; and when the artistry of the synthesizers increased we were among the first armchair pioneers to explore the wildernesses of Livingstone's Africa, Scott's Antarctica and Lowell's Mars. The simulations were far from perfect, but we refused to recognize their imperfections.

There was no limit to our ambition; the simulation of contemporary environments was technically much better, but it was always the most exotic milieu which attracted us. When cosmic voyage tapes first became available we immediately discounted those based in contemporary astronomical theory, and became aficionados of that esoteric species which dealt with outdated models of the universe. Together, we abandoned our bodies to take flight into the cosmos of Poe's *Eureka* and Camille Flammarion's *Lumen*. There, our carefully-educated collaborative imagination found a unique opportunity to sense that which is truly fundamental to mankind's awareness of the enormity of the universe. Of all the syntheses we owned, it was those wild flights of obsolete but grandiose fancy which we found most inspiring – and, oddly enough, most convincing. Although they were eccentric fictions, replete with ideas discredited by subsequent advances in science, they seemed to both of us to contain a particular awesomeness, a very special sense of the infinite and the eternal, which passage of time and the march of earthly progress had not devalued in the least.

**W**e were happy, Morella and I. I thought – and I sincerely believed, with all my heart – that we could be happy forever. I could have been. I had that kind of strength. But Morella, for all her fascination with antiquity, was much more a child of her era than I ever was. Her

love for me began gradually to cool, and to transform itself into the kind of tolerant benevolence which our contemporaries consider to be normal and desirable.

She *did* still love me; of that there is no doubt. But she wanted to love other people too; she wanted to take a more active part in society; she wanted to look to the future as well as the past. All this she said, and more. She had become as dissatisfied with our reclusive life of study and leisure as she had formerly become with the eventful riot of life in the household where she had been raised. She felt that it was time to look for work of some kind, time to undertake new experiments in lifestyle, time to see new places as they actually were, without the aid of a Virtual Reality hood.

I understood what she said, but I was hurt. I cannot entirely explain the subsequent alteration of my feelings towards her. I certainly never stopped loving her, and my love never underwent the kind of transmutation – the horrific decay, as it seemed to me – to which hers was subject, but the temper of my own passion changed nevertheless. I loved her utterly, devotedly, fiercely; and yet, as her total devotion to me began to falter, it soon came about that I could no longer bear the touch of her slender fingers, nor the low tone of her musical voice, nor the lustre of her melancholy eyes.

She was melancholy, on my behalf, because she saw all too clearly what the dilution of her love was doing to me.

We continued to live our life, for a while. We were still avid to acquire and use every new synthesize of the particular kind we loved best. In the dark and marvellous cosmos of the 19th century imagination, where we existed as disembodied souls of the kind Flammarion had described, we were incarnated on a dozen different worlds, in alien forms exoskeletal and endoskeletal, sentient and semiconscious, organic and inorganic. I could not help thinking of this, sometimes, as a search for that one paradisaical Virtual Reality – which I secretly labelled the *Virtuous Reality* – in which we would recover the fundamental harmony of our souls, and thus be saved from the dissolution of our marriage.

Alas, there was no such destiny for us.

When we were not adventuring in obsolete universes, I continued to read to her all the most gorgeous and sentimental words penned by the Romantic poets: all the most exquisitely-wrought verbal symphonies of the past. By this means too I sought a magic spell which might reignite the fire of our mutual passion, but it was all too obvious that Morella's growing indifference was reducing the words to mere plaintive and desolate echoes.

It was inevitable that she would leave, and I had to accept it. She would go out into the world to join an organic household, where she would have four or five co-husbands and as many co-wives, while I would be alone... forever.

It was on an autumnal evening, when the winds lay still in heaven, that she departed.

"I will never forget," she promised me. "What we have shared will always be a treasure to me. What you have taught me will always be part of me, and I am glad that I have walked with you in the wilder pastures of Infinity."

I kissed her forehead, but could not speak.

"I must go," she said, "but you will have me still, in your memory. We have had as many years as the lovers of old, who were all-too-soon parted by disease and death. They came to this pass as naturally as we have come, and such moments as this were part and parcel of the pain of their finite hearts."

"Morella!" I whispered, but could say no more.

"Goodbye, my love," she murmured, as she turned her back.

**I**t was not until she had been gone for several days – or perhaps for several months – that I began to realize how true her words were. At first, I was plunged into a pit of despair. Whatever I did, wherever I went, I felt her absence. Whenever I took up a book to read, the one thought present in my mind was that I was reading silently because Morella was not there. I never entered the room where we had assembled our Virtual Reality apparatus, because I knew that I would see two data suits, and that there would be no one with me. I could not bear to think of venturing alone into ancient streets, let alone the darkness of ancient infinity.

It seemed, for a dreadful interval, that when Morella had gone my life had gone with her, and that I had been left with nothing but the dust and ashes of my existence.

But I was wrong, and she was right. In the long-gone days when all men – or the best of them, at least – felt as I had schooled myself to feel, the grief of parting was a common thing, which had to be faced with courage. To live as I had undertaken to live, in a stormy private world of wild desire and brittle hope, required a definite inner fortitude, and a proper appreciation of the preciousness of all things briefly held and lost again. I saw, eventually, that although Morella was gone, the glory of our love could never be annihilated while memory preserved it.

She had spoken the simple truth when she sought to reassure me, and to soften the blow of her departure. Memory was the key to the problem which faced me. What, after all, were the texts which I loved so dearly but memory made incarnate, memory crystallized, memory enshrined? What were the synthetapes whose evolution we had followed so keenly but brave attempts to supplement and enrich those incarnate memories, to replace the dimensions of touch and vision which text could never carry?

I began to repair my loss in the simplest possible way: I began to read aloud again, just as if Morella were there. While my eyes were fixed upon the ancient pages all else was invisible; the matter of her actual presence simply did not arise. I read to her. You may think of it as pretence, if you will, but it was not that: it was an authentic conquest of circumstance by imagination. I told myself that, and meant it.

There was a moment of hesitation. I suppose, before I was able to take this revelation to its logical conclusion. There must have been a pause when I said to myself: "What a pity it is that the same stratagem would not work with a synthetape, where the eyes are not held captive by text, and where the absence of my beloved would be manifest." But it was only a moment: a fleeting instant of thoughtlessness. I must have seen immediately what a fool I was to think that;

when the realization came to me it must have come as a blinding flash of enlightenment, which made me feel utterly ridiculous for not having seen it before.

What I saw was this: that the words and images biochemically graven in my brain were not the only set of memories that Morella had left behind. She had left behind a very different, and complementary set, in the adaptive programmes which had adjusted her data suit to her form and her movements.

I knew, of course, that there already existed countless synthetapes which reproduced the sensations of social, and sexual, intercourse – that Virtual Realities could include synthetic persons as well as synthetic landscapes and universes. Such sensations were as crude and incomplete as all other Virtual Realities were, but they only required the same input of imagination, the same willing suspension of disbelief, to function. Had I wanted to, I could have commissioned the modification of a standard sextape so that the female image therein was moulded to the image of Morella, but that was exactly what I did not want to do. That would have been a kind of self-betrayal, a deliberate acceptance of the ersatz. What I wanted – what I needed – was something infinitely more subtle.

I did the work myself, instructed in method and planning by the datanet, assisted by microrobotic circuit workers trained by standard skillpacks. My mechanical servants and I patiently and ingeniously rewired the data suit which Morella had used – which no one but Morella had ever used – so that even though it remained empty it would project into any synthetape the perfect image of a hypothetical collaborator, built out of all the recordings it had made in the course of projecting the image of the actual Morella into our many adventures in the reconstituted past.

It is true that the Morella who was thus enabled to accompany me into all the worlds which we had previously entered, and all the new worlds which came on to the market week by week, was not quite whole. She was unable to innovate in conversation, and the repertoire of her movements and physical responses was both limited and stereotyped, but she was the real Morella. She was not some simulacrum painted by a synthetape artist working from photographs and other dead data. She was a reincarnate memory whose new existence was contiguous with her former one and which had evolved out of it in a natural manner. She did not quite have Morella's mind, but she had Morella's soul.

In existential terms, I was prepared to meet her half way. I only had to do as she did, and be as she was, to secure a union of equals, eternal and indivisible.

**T**hus it was that while still living, I embarked upon a kind of afterlife. I set out to live in the myriad alternative worlds contained in books and tapes – and as the acids in the paper gradually consumed my collection of ancient artefacts in spite of all my efforts to preserve them, I turned more and more frequently to the tapes. I cut myself adrift from the present, and turned my back upon the future. I kept little reckoning of time or place, and the earth itself seemed to grow dark, becoming phantasmal, so that its figures passed before me like flitting shadows. Among them all I beheld only – Morella.

With Morella, I explored the mysteries of the ages; with Morella, I explored the wonders of the firmament; with Morella, I lived a thousand lives on a thousand worlds; with Morella I tasted the sweet fruits of Heaven and the fiery liquors of Hell.

With Morella, I found my Virtuous Reality. It is here, and it is now; it is everywhere, and everything, and evermore.

**Brian Stableford**, born in 1948, is a writer so prolific he boggles the mind. As well as his major "serious" novel *The Angel of Pain* (Simon & Schuster, £14.99; reviewed in IZ 53 by John Clute), the past year has seen publication of his collection, *Sexual Chemistry* (S & S.), and two of his "Brian Craig" quickies, *Storm Warriors* and *Ghost Dancers* (GW Books, £4.99 each), plus a whole slew of anthologies from *Dedalus – The Dedalus Book of Decadence*, *Tales of the Wandering Jew*, *The Dedalus Book of 19th-Century British Fantasy*, etc. In the last 12 months, he has also contributed short stories to *Amazing*, *F&SF* and *Interzone* ("The Man Who Invented Good Taste," issue 45). On top of all that, he writes a regular 4,000-word essay for each issue of *MILLION: The Magazine About Popular Fiction* (on subjects ranging from Robinson Crusoe to Hank Janson); he contributes pieces to *Foundation* (see his remarkable autobiographical essay in their issue 50); and so on and on...

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# The Gödel Sunflowers

## Stephen Baxter

Throughout his voyage from Earth aboard the Spline warship, Kapur remained alone. Endlessly he studied Virtuals on his destination, trying to comprehend the task that confronted him.

The warship was heading for one of the oldest stars in the Galaxy, a sphere of primordial matter hovering in the halo like a failed beacon. About five hundred of its contemporaries still sprinkled photons over the young-matter soup of the swirling main disc, defiant against the erosion of aeons.

But this star had failed, long since. Now it was choked with iron; carbon dusted its cooling surface.

The artefact men called the Snowflake surrounded this dwarf, a vast setting for an ancient, faded jewel.

Since the construction of the Snowflake, fourteen billion years had shivered across the swirling face of the Galaxy.

Now, at last, from out of the main disc, a ship was climbing up to the Snowflake: the Spline warship bearing Kapur.

Kapur's mission was Assimilation. Humans would not let the Xeelee take anything they could not Assimilate.

Kapur would be given five days to complete his task.

He was a policeman, seconded to this assignment. In the fleshy warmth of the Spline's interior, the enormity of the crime he must prevent kept Kapur awake for long hours.

The Spline ship was a mile-wide ball of hardened flesh. Buried deep in pockmarks, sensors which had once been eyes turned slowly in response to the electronic prompting of humans.

The Spline sailed to within a hundred million miles of the Snowflake, slowed, stopped. For days it hovered. A swarm of passive, powerless probes were sprinkled cautiously over the Snowflake.

The disc of the Galaxy was smoke shot through with starlight, a carpet beneath this slow tableau.

At last the flesh of the Spline puckered, split, parted. A child-craft, a child, a cylinder of silver, wriggled out of the revealed orifice. The child spread shining sails and shook them into a parasol shape; the sails seemed to glisten, as if damp from the womb.

Ruby-red laser light seared from the Spline, lanced into the sails. Slowly, slowly, the fine material billowed in response and filled out. Like thistledown, goaded by the laser-breath of the Spline, the child-yacht descended towards the Snowflake.

The interior of the yacht was a box twenty feet long and six wide. It was too small for two men and the equipment which kept them alive.

Kapur sat before the viewport which formed much of the nose of the yacht. Through the port he could see the dwindling fist of flesh that was the Spline freighter, the perpetually startling sight of the Galaxy in plan view. But even though the yacht was now mere hours away from its rendezvous, of the Snowflake he still saw nothing; not even a rusty smudge, he thought sourly.

Mace, the yacht's other occupant, sat close to Kapur. He peered out with interest, his Eyes gleaming like an insect's. Mace was a Navy man. Stocky, sharp and balding, he was about twenty-five – half Kapur's age. Kapur, dark, slim, uncomfortable in his borrowed Navy uniform, shrank from Mace's confident bulk.

Mace swivelled his turret of a head towards Kapur. "Well? What do you think of the 'Flake'?"

Kapur shrugged, in the small space he occupied. "What do you expect me to think?"

Mace peered at Kapur, then frowned. "Maybe if you Opened your Eyes you could form an opinion."

Kapur, with a silent sigh, complied.

His Eyes' response spectrum broadened away from the narrow human band; his retinae stung under a sleet of photons of all wavelengths.

The Galaxy dazzled, its core shrieking X-rays. The Snowflake emerged from the darkness like frost crystallizing on a windowpane.

"Let's get to work," Mace said. "We'll review the gross features first. OK?"

Kapur, his Eyes full of the infinite recesses of the Snowflake, did not reply.

"The 'Flake is a regular tetrahedron," Mace said. "It's built around the remains of a black dwarf; the ancient star is at the tetrahedron's centroid. The Snowflake measures over ten million miles along its edges. We don't know how it maintains its structure in the gravity well of the star." Mace's voice was bright, clear, interested, and entirely lacking in awe. "The artefact has the mass of the Earth, approximately. But the Earth is eight thousand miles wide. This thing has been puffed out like candy-floss; it's filled with struts, threads and whiskers of iron, like delicate scaffolding. The structure's not a bad approximation to a space-filling curve. Strictly speaking it has a fractional dimension, somewhere between two and three... And it has a fractal architecture. Do you know what that means?"

"I don't have a math background," Kapur said.

Mace let his silence comment on that for a long second. "You're going to do well with the Gödel theorem, then," he said lightly.

"What?"

"Never mind. When we inspect the 'Flake' closely we'll find the tetrahedron motif, repeated again and again, on all scales. That's why we call it the Snowflake," Mace said. "Not because of its shape, but because a snowflake is fractal too. Recursive structures at all scales. And it's been there a hell of a long time."

"How do you know that?"

Mace, his Eyes fixed on the 'Flake', absently rubbed at his nostrils with his palm. "Because it's so damn cold. In the aeons since its sun died, it's cooled to close to the background temperature of the Universe — three degrees above absolute zero... although," he mused, "when the thing was built the sky still shone at about eighteen K."

"Do you understand what these numbers mean, Kapur? I know you've hardly been off Earth before this assignment." Mace wasn't bothering to conceal his relaxed, malice-free contempt.

In fact this was Kapur's second such mission. The first had been a requisition to the failed Assimilation of the Khorte Colony.

He said, "Why iron?"

"Because iron is the most stable element. The Snowmen — the builders — wanted this to last a long time, Kapur."

Kapur nodded. "Then was this a planet, once, before being spun out like a... fairy-tale castle?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. When this was built, only a billion years after the Bang, there were scarcely any heavy elements to form planets. The Galaxy itself would have been no more than a disc of smoke, illuminated here and there by hot-spot protostars." The gunmetal Eyes rotated to Kapur. "Kapur, you also need to understand that it's not just the physical structure that's important here. There are many levels beyond the material; even now that thing is an iron-wisp web of data, a cacophony of bits endlessly dancing against the deprivations of entropy."

Kapur smiled. "You use words well, Mace," he said.

Mace seemed uninterested. He went on, "The Snowmen loaded everything they knew into this artefact. Eventually, they... went away." He grinned at Kapur. "Maybe. Or maybe they're still here."

Kapur shivered; he grasped his own bony elbows. "And why, my friend? What do you think? Why did they build this marvellous sculpture of iron and data, slowly cooling?"

Mace still grinned. "That's your job, isn't it?"

Kapur stared into the cold, waiting heart of the Snowflake.

He was not expected to succeed here.

A thousand years after its eruption from Earth, humanity's colonization wavefront was spreading at light speed through the Galaxy. The conquest of other species had become an industry. Assimilation itself was an underfunded, almost cursory exercise, staffed by barely trained draftees like himself: there was no time, not enough expertise in xenopsychology, xenobiology...

Kapur had failed before.

He had watched the Khorte Colony, an ancient, hive-like accretion of crystalline carbon — diamond —

fold in on itself, burn, die; perhaps one per cent of the Colony's stored knowledge had been saved amid the devastating beams.

He wondered if this bright young Navy man had ever heard of the Khorte Colony.

**T**he yacht tacked into the laser breeze, slowed, halted before one tetrahedral plane. Two men pushed through an air-curtain into space, bulbous and clumsy in cold-suits.

The faintest spurt of low-velocity helium pushed at Kapur's back, propelling him towards the Snowflake. The fat, padded suit was snug and warm around him, like a blanket; he felt oddly safe, remote from the immensities around him. At the centre of his visor Mace sailed ahead, arms and legs protruding comically from the bulk of his cold-suit.

They stopped a few thousand miles from the iron plane. The face swept to infinity all around Kapur like a vast geometrical diagram; the horizon was razor-sharp against the intergalactic darkness, the three vertices too distant to perceive as corners. His Eyes, set to human wavelengths, made out some detail in the 'Flake'; it was like a gigantic engraving, glowing dully in the smoky light of the Galaxy.

Kapur felt small and helpless. He had four days left.

Mace's commentary came to him along a laser path, helmet to helmet. "All right," Mace said. "Here we are in our patent cold-suits; inside, as snug as bugs; outside, radiating heat at barely a fraction more than the background three K."

As Kapur stared the Snowflake seemed to open out like a flower; he saw layer on layer of recursive detail, sketches of nested tetrahedra dwindling into the soft brown heart of the artefact. "It's wonderful, Mace."

"Yeah. And as delicate as wishes. Hey, Kapur. Give me your Eyes. I'll show you the data."

Kapur hesitated, gathering his resolve.

He hated using the implants. Each time he Opened his Eyes he felt a little more of his humanity leach away.

Now he breathed deeply. The air inside the cold-suit was warm and scented, oddly, of cut grass. With an odd, semi-hypnotic relinquishing of will, he deferred to Mace.

His Eyes Opened wide.

The Snowflake changed, kaleidoscopically.

"You're seeing a construct from our passive probes," Mace whispered. "False-colour graphics of the data streams."

Terabits of ancient wisdom hissed on whiskers of iron, sparking like neurons in some played-out brain. It was beautiful, Kapur thought; beautiful and monstrous, like the mind of God.

His soul recoiled. He sought refuge in detail, the comparatively mundane.

Kapur knew that the mission profile had been designed with caution in mind. The Spline ship had parked over an AU away; he and Mace had approached in a yacht riding a tight laser beam, eschewing chemical flame. "Mace, what would happen if we let stray heat get at the 'Flake'? Would we disrupt the structure?"

"You mean the physical structure? Maybe, but that's not the point, Kapur. It's the data that's the treasure here."

"And would a little heat be so harmful?"

"It's to do with thermodynamics. There's a lower

bound on how much energy it takes to store a bit. The limit is set by the three-K background temperature."

"So the lower that temperature is, the less energy a bit would take."

"Right. And so if we raised the 'Flake's temperature, even locally, we would risk wiping out terabits. Also, it follows from the thermodynamic limit that there's an upper bound on how much data you can store with a given amount of energy – or, equivalently, mass. The upper limit for the Snowflake's mass is around ten to power sixty-four bits. Kapur, we estimate that the 'Flake actually holds around ten to power sixty."

Kapur stared into the flower-like heart of the Snowflake. "I should be impressed?"

"Damn right," Mace growled. "For a start, the whole of human civilization would be characterized by only ten to power twenty bits. Even after hundreds of Assimilations. And, just in technological terms, to get within four orders of magnitude of the theoretical limit... It's almost unimaginable."

"Now. Look." Mace, silhouetted like a cartoon grotesque, pointed at a knot of colour and activity. Kapur perceived something like a sunflower, a fist of spirals and tessellations surrounded by "petals," great sheets of information which faded into the background chatter. Pellets of data streaked into and out of the core – a little like insects, Kapur thought at first; but then he saw how the pellets embedded themselves in the sunflower, endlessly enriching and renewing it.

"What is it?"

"It seems to be the dominant data configuration," Mace called. "The analogue of the tetrahedral motif on the physical level. It represents a theorem. See, the heart of the structure is the core statement, the petals corollaries, endlessly thrown off and lost..."

"What theorem?"

"Gödel's Incompleteness. We think. We're guessing, extrapolating on hints of structure we've picked up elsewhere... But it's not really a theorem, here. It's merely a statement of the result. Like an axiom; a given."

"I don't understand."

Mace laughed, briefly and scornfully. Wriggling before the landscape of information he pointed again. Amid a meadow of data structures, Kapur picked out another sunflower, the characteristic Gödel shape. Mace jabbed both arms against the vast data diorama, again and again. "There, and there! What do you see, Kapur?"

Gödel, Kapur saw, repeated over and over; there was a fractal spiral of Gödel sunflowers here, embedded in this chill web of data.

"There's more, of course," Mace said. "We've recognized a lot of physical understanding in here, particularly representations of cosmic events. See that starburst?" A firework of red and yellow, endlessly dynamic, scattered a hundredfold through the 'Flake. "That's Mach's principle: that the inertia of an object is induced by the net gravitational attraction of the rest of the Universe –"

"Tell me about Gödel," Kapur said patiently.

On the low-quality laser-link, Mace's voice was like a buzzing insect. "Gödel was a genius. A twenty-five-year-old Austrian; a Mozart of his subject. In the middle of the 20th century he produced a theorem on undecidability."

"Gödel studied mathematics in the abstract. Think



Illustrations by Jason Hurst

about that, policeman: not just the mathematics you studied at high school; not the maths I studied in the Navy college – but any sort of mathematics which it is possible to construct.”

“You have my attention,” Kapur said drily. “Go on.”

“Gödel showed that within any mathematical scheme you can write down statements which it would be impossible to prove or disprove. They are undecidable, you see. And so mathematics can never be made complete. You could never deduce everything from a finite set of axioms; there would always be new statements to make... new facts to record, if you like.”

Kapur shook his head. “I cannot imagine how it is possible even to begin to frame such a theorem, let alone to prove it.”

“It isn’t that difficult,” Mace said lightly. “It’s rather like the standard proof that the real numbers are uncountable; you make a list of all possible statements within your general mathematical scheme – and from that list generate another statement which isn’t in the list –”

“Never mind.” Kapur let the terrifying implications sink in. How could there be a hole in mathematics – in the most fundamental of human inventions? He felt as if the floor had fallen away from his Universe.

What kind of people had these Snowmen become, to hold such an awesome, nihilistic theorem at the heart of their philosophy?

Kapur closed his Eyes again – turned them off, in fact; the orchard of data frost-flowers melted to cold, inert iron.

**K**apur and Mace made three more trips to the iron epidermis of the Snowflake. Mace pointed out more forests of rustling data, tentatively mapped by humans. There were tigers in those forests, though, Kapur came to realize; great beasts of wisdom and understanding whose nature men could not even guess at.

Kapur spent several of his precious hours hanging immobile, his cold-suit barely warmer than the ancient, surrounding echo of the Big Bang. He felt old, inadequate. Assimilation – bloodless Assimilation – depended on psychology, on the determination of goals. The goal of humanity was to rise up, to grow, to confront the Xeelee. If Kapur could determine the goals of the Snowmen, then those objectives could be subverted to serve human purposes. If not, then the ‘Flake, the ‘Men, had no value.

But how could Kapur, inexperienced as he was, touch the dreams of the ancient individuals frozen into this data sculpture?

He consoled himself with the thought that failure would be no disgrace, that he could return to his home, his job, without shame.

Kapur did not discuss his feelings openly with Mace; but, as his time wore away in the musty cage of the yacht, he sensed Mace’s swelling mood of triumph. The Navy man was intelligent and endlessly fascinated by his surroundings, Kapur came to see; but he clearly felt that Assimilation was a fool’s errand, a sop thrown to liberal instincts before the Navy was unleashed.

He was probably right, Kapur thought.

It was Mace’s faint gloating, as much as a sense of outrage at the damage the Spline gravity-wave planet-

breakers would do to the Snowflake, which determined him to keep trying to the end of his time. He could endure failure, he decided; but not failure in front of Mace.

He had a new idea.

“Tell me this,” he said to Mace. “How much data characterizes a human being?”

Mace opened his mouth, closed it again.

Kapur pressed politely, “If my thoughts were somehow transcribed, day and night for my entire life – how many bits to capture that?”

Mace smiled and closed his Eyes. “All right, policeman; let’s play games. You produce, let’s say, a hundred thousand discrete thoughts per day. Each concept is – what, a hundred bits?”

“We’ll give you fifty years of active adulthood, between infancy and the onset of age. That gives, ah, two to power ten bits in all. Round it up; say ten to power eleven.” Mace pursed his lips, opened his Eyes and studied Kapur briefly. “Interesting. So there’s the equivalent of something like ten to power forty-nine human individuals in the ‘Flake –”

Kapur nodded. “Isolate one of them, with your sensors. Can you do that? Pick out an island of bits. I don’t want to know what happens within it; arrange it so I only perceive the inputs and outputs.”

Mace rubbed his chin. “You want to talk to a Snowman?”

“Don’t mock me,” Kapur said patiently.

“What will you talk about, for God’s sake?”

Kapur, feeling his way, thought quickly. “Gödel’s theorem.”

Mace leaned forward, ready to scorn – then hesitated. “Well, why the hell not?” he said at last. “You could give it a human proof of the theorem. That might be kind of interesting.”

Kapur waited, but Mace’s laughter did not come. “You have to help me understand you, Mace. Are you serious?”

“Sure... I’ll code up the proof in a form compatible with their storage templates; I’ll dump it into your Eyes and you can download it into the sensors when we go over there again.”

“No.” Kapur held up a hand. “I want you to let me go alone.”

Mace’s Eyes glinted, steel globes embedded in the flesh of his lively, amused face. “Why?”

Kapur held his gaze. “Because you’re waiting for me to fail. I don’t need that; I don’t consider this any kind of game, or contest between us. I don’t want you around me.”

Mace laughed, uncertainly. Then, as he perceived Kapur’s seriousness, a look of bafflement and hurt spread across his broad face. This, Kapur realized, could be the first time any human being had rejected Mace in any way. He searched Mace’s face for remorse, for shame; but he found only wounded pride.

“Do what you like,” said Mace at last. “I’ll code up the proof.”

There were two days left.

**K**apur saw the Snowman as a dully-glowing globe of purple, miles wide, embedded beneath the planar skin of the ‘Flake. Mach starbursts, Gödel sunflowers and other characteristic formations littered the globe, as still as flowers under glass. ‘Flake data streams chattered softly into the Snowman, and



human sensor probes ringed the 'Man like patient puppies, blocks of metal silhouetted against lurid data.

Kapur, swaddled in his cold-suit, cowered. Here, confronting the reality of the 'Flake, his isolation scheme seemed vacuous. He had no idea, of course, if the arbitrary assemblage of data before him represented an individual – or, indeed, if consciousness itself persisted at all in the 'Flake.

He was almost certain that it did not.

But he had to try, he reminded himself.

Enough. He focused his gaze on the nearest of the probes; tight laser light slid from his Eyes and into the probe's cold hide.

When the link was secure he downloaded the human proof of Gödel to the probe.

The proof was a string of orange beads on a wire of light; the beads splashed against the target probe and rattled into the Snowman. Finally they settled into a cubical configuration: neat and precise, although dwarfed by the richness and profusion of other forms within the 'Man.

'Flake data slugs lanced through the human proof, copying, integrating – but changing nothing.

Kapur opened a line to Mace, in the yacht. "I don't understand," he said. "Why don't they evaluate, interpret our proof?"

"Are you surprised? Maybe the Snowmen aren't interested in interpretation and evaluation."

"What do you mean?"

"Gödel's Incompleteness, remember? No matter how much you derive from a body of data, there will always be statements you could not have deduced. Always something else to store."

"...Ah. And Gödel is at the heart of their ancient, world-weary, philosophy."

Mace laughed briefly. "I think you're working it out, policeman. Knowing the limitations of deduction, the Snowmen decided that to record events – and only to record – was the highest calling of life. And that's all they want to do. They took apart their world, rebuilt it as a monstrous storage system... used all the material at their disposal to freeze as much data as they could. They won't do anything with our proof; for fourteen billion years they have merely watched time unravel –"

"There's your streak of poetry again, Mace."

"Your Assimilation must fail," Mace said bluntly.

Kapur sighed. "Why?"

"Think about it. The Snowmen have no motivation we can connect with. Our actions will mean nothing to them – we, almost by definition within their Gödelian philosophy, dance meaninglessly before them. Even their own destruction would be no more than an event, a final act to be stored and noted."

"That can't be all, Mace. There must be more. Every species wants to grow, to develop," Kapur reflected. "Even if all they wanted was a greater data storage capacity –"

"Come in, Kapur. It's over. I'll call in the Spline."

"No." Kapur closed his eyes, tried to keep the trembling out of his voice. "I still have time."

With slow insolence, Mace said, "It's your trip, policeman."



**W**ithout returning to the yacht Kapur had Mace download more human datasets and propositions; and he learned quickly how

to input new material – his own reflections and feelings – into his Eye stores.

That took most of a day.

Kapur slept briefly, nestled within the meadow scents of his cold-suit.

When he turned to the 'Flake once more, he had six hours left.

The Snowman had not changed. The human proof of Gödel remained lodged within its abstraction of a belly, a cold, primitive lump.

Kapur began to download data to the probes: more and more, as rapidly as he could. Mathematics first. Then, on a whim, music – he watched as ancient compositions frosted into veils of blue ice within the 'Man.

Human history. He told the 'Man of the Xeelee, humanity's vast, implacable foe; and of how mankind was seeking to mobilize the resources of a Galaxy in its war.

He told the 'Man what the humans on board the Spline ship planned to do to the Snowflake.

He told of his own fears, doubts – his awe, here before the Snowflake, with the Galaxy a cloud beneath him; of his almost superstitious response to Gödel; of his fear of failure, and his petty relationship with Mace.

The 'Man was like a mirror, one part of his mind told him, or like a Virtual psychoanalysis program. There was no one there to respond, he knew now, but he told it all anyway.

He told the 'Man of his own, tenuous, qualifications for this Assimilation mission. That he was a policeman; that he specialized in the resolution of the cruel, the vicious, the most bizarre crimes. His job was to work through the sites of crimes, trying to see the smashed property, the bones and scattered flesh, through the eyes of the perpetrator.

Kapur was qualified enough to seek the motivation of the Snowmen, after twenty-five years striving to unravel the minds of aliens within his own species.

All of this shivered into the heart of the Snowman, without comment or reaction, without praise or disgust.

Kapur, his time spent, grew ashamed. He fell silent, arms akimbo, before the maw of the Snowflake.

The 'Man watched steadily.

And, at last, Kapur understood.

Something like a ripple passed under Kapur; it was as if space were a lake on which his encased body floated, passive.

"Kapur," Mace's voice was strained. "The Spline."

Kapur felt enormously tired. "What about it?"

"...It's gone."

**T**ime had run out. The Spline had opened its laser-cannon orifices.

...The ship had been torn aside, dragged from its site like an eyeball from a socket, thrown a million miles across space; it had been left spinning, bruised and torn.

Kapur returned to the yacht.

"Were there injuries?"

Mace's face was wide, blank, angry. "What do you think? But the automatics are functioning; the ship's returning to pick us up. What did you do to the damn 'Flake, Kapur?"

"It was not I who tried to open fire on it," Kapur said softly. "What happened?"

"Gravity waves," Mace said. "Like a tractor beam."

Suddenly fear broke to the surface of Mace's hard features; his Eyes seemed even more incongruous, metal islands in a sea of human emotion. He pointed through the viewport, picking out a palm-sized patch of darkness. "From the direction of the Virgo super-cluster; although that's probably coincidence..."

"I caught an echo of the beam."

"Kapur, I think I know how they did it."

"The Snowmen?"

"Mach's principle. I think they can manipulate Mach's principle."

Kapur shook his head. With a kind of irritated patience, Mace said, "The Spline is embedded in a Universe of matter. That matter tugs at the Spline with gravity fields – but the fields surround the ship uniformly; they are equal in all directions, isotropic and timeless."

Kapur frowned. "And you think the Snowmen have a way of making the field – unequal?"

Mace laughed uneasily. "I guess you learn a lot in fourteen billion years."

Kapur turned the concept over in his mind. The Mach beam was spectacular, he decided. But the Universe was filled with spectacular weapons and technologies.

Gödel's theorem, though. That was something else. That was truly terrifying. Mace, young, unimaginative, had responded more to the blazing of a zap gun than to the fact of a Universe without bottom or top, without meaning, unknowable.

Kapur almost envied him.

"I think I've figured it out," he said to Mace.

"What? Their motivation?" Through his fear, Mace looked briefly interested. "Tell me, policeman. I knew there had to be something; every sentient species has goals."

"We had the pieces of the puzzle, almost from the start," Kapur said. "In their design of the 'Flake, the Snowmen had already made near-optimal use of matter, by recording information right down to the thermodynamic limit... which is set by the background temperature of the Universe. But they knew from Gödel that there will always be more events to record."

Mace's face crumpled sourly. "Oh. Are you telling me that they are waiting for the Universe to cool down... just so they can store more data?"

Kapur smiled. "The idea is pleasing. In the aeons since the building of the Snowflake, they've already achieved a six-fold increase in capacity! And in another forty billion years the capacity will double again..."

"Patience, Mace. That is the key."

Mace stared into Kapur's face, the lines around his Eyes betraying hostility. "Policeman, sometimes you frighten me."

Kapur, obscurely pleased by this reaction, did not reply.

Mace said, "Do you think there'll be another attempt?"

"To Assimilate?" Kapur shook his head. "I doubt the 'Flake would let us come so close again."

He turned to face the emptiness of the viewport. With Eyes no more than human he looked beyond the filmy sails of the laser yacht and saw the Spline coming to collect them. It moved cautiously, all weapons orifices open.

# Wisdom of the Ancients

David Langford

The works of Lewis Carroll are not the likeliest source of advice to aspiring writers – apart possibly from “Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves.” But while browsing through his copious volumes of less famous stuff, I rediscovered a poem which remains instructive, didactic and desperately relevant. Full of dubious advice, it takes a poke at contemporary “formula” poetry; it’s called *Poeta Fit, Non Noscitur*, which I immediately translated as “Hey, I must steal this for an article.”

“Then, if you’d be impressive,  
Remember what I say,  
That abstract qualities begin  
With capitals alway:  
The True, the Good, the Beautiful –  
Those are the things that pay!”

Straight away you think of today’s bog-standard fantasy novel, in which the Fell Sword bearing the Great Rune of the White Gods is raised by the One King against the Dark Bane of the Chaos Lord in the Black Tower of the Inner City, etc. Yes indeed, isn’t it easy to make all your stage-props seem more important by allotting them capital letters?

Three problems do follow. This is such an effortless, clichéd gimmick that assiduous use no longer achieves much beyond proclaiming you a lazy and formulaic writer. Worse, enough repetition of such low-budget spotlighting may make the Fell Spell or, for that matter, the Black Hole seem progressively more trite and silly. And sooner or later, plot requirements will force several of the capitalized phrases to cohabit in the same paragraph, producing a clotted and reader-resistant mess like my sample above. Spurious Capitals (to pinch a phrase of Christopher Priest’s) need to be used with enormous caution.

Carroll’s tongue-in-cheek mentor would draw a second moral from that spoof fantasy sentence: he advises that

“...there are epithets  
That suit with any word –  
As well as Harvey’s Reading Sauce  
With fish, or flesh, or bird –  
Of these, ‘wild,’ ‘lonely,’ ‘weary,’  
‘strange’,  
Are much to be preferred.”

The budding writer is quick to seize on the possibilities:

“And will it do, O will it do,  
To take them in a lump –  
As ‘the wild man went his weary way  
To a strange and lonely pump?’”  
“Nay, nay! You must not hastily  
To such conclusions jump.”

It’s sadly true that – again in fantasy more than sf – the all-purpose epithets have become devalued. If you take a long view, the beginnings of the rot are visible in the poetry of Swinburne... alternately praised as “the supreme master in English of the bleak beauty of little words” and disparaged (by Edmund Wilson, no less) for his “generalizing visageless monosyllables.” Tolkien was rather fond of such handy words, like “dark” or “cold” or “grim,” which to the uncritical eye produce a vaguely evocative effect irrespective of sense.

Over-use of the trick (besides making you look like yet another bloody Tolkien imitator) leads to poorly focused writing. One has to supply one’s own associations when no precise image emerges from the text. Lazy readers actually tend to find the result soothing, since there’s no need to give the prose any particular attention when it merely pushes standard, familiar buttons. This characteristically woozy, monochrome fantasy style recalls Edmund Wilson’s nasty suggestion that Swinburne had invented a new genre – “alcoholic poetry.” For example:

And the high gods took in hand  
Fire, and the falling of tears,  
And a measure of sliding sand  
From under the feet of the years,  
And froth, and drift of the sea;  
And dust of the labouring earth;  
And bodies of things to be  
In the houses of death and of birth...

Anyone identifying that as more Carroll loses sixty points. The sounds are nice but the sense (“take care of the sense...”) has grown somewhat hazy and diffuse. The analogous breed of Tolkien imitation, all rolling empty cadences, slips down with far less effort or memorability than something quirky, knobby and individual by (let’s say) Mervyn Peake.

When writing a computer program to generate cod fantasy titles for nameless and shameful reasons, I made up a shortlist of terse “epithets that suit with any word.” Here’s an edited version: black, blind, bright, chaos (this seems to have become an adjective, don’t ask me why), chill, cold, dark, dead, deep, dim, dire, doomed, dread, false, far, fell, fire, foul, great, grey, grim, high, iron, lone, long, lorn, lost, mad, old, one, pale, sea, stark, stern, strange, tall, true, vast, vile, white, wild. Yes, I know, a couple are nouns, legitimized like “chaos” by years of Fire Dragons and Sea Changes. You will doubtless be able to think of more, you clever person.

Obviously, many of these are liable to turn up naturally from time to time. But if you find you’re addicted to using them a great deal, especially in generalized or indiscriminate contexts (“dark” forever referring to baddies or forebodings rather than illumination, “cold” to matters unconnected with the thermometer) or in capitals, you should perhaps be a best-selling sword-and-sorcery author. I forget which.

All writing is a tightrope-walk, and when trying to avoid the pitfall of easy generality one can effortlessly fall off on the other side...

“Next, when you are describing  
A shape, or sound, or tint;  
Don’t state the matter plainly,  
But put it in a hint;  
And learn to look at all things,  
With a sort of mental squint.”  
“For instance, if I wished, Sir,  
Of mutton-pies to tell,  
Should I say ‘dreams of fleecy flocks  
Pent in a wheaten cell?’”  
“Why, yes,” the old man said: “that phrase  
Would answer very well.”

You can’t add much to an example like that. Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon poets went in a lot for “kennings,” allusive phrases which didn’t cause confusion because everyone understood the code; when the skald said “bone-house” people knew he meant the human body and not the local crypt. (Or at any rate they pretended they did, and asked futile questions later.) The

terror of being obvious leads to ad-hoc kennings, euphemisms and neologisms which all too often misfire: Tennyson gave us "ocean-spoil" because it seemed too downmarket to write "fish." Boxers used to "tap" each other's "claret," to save past centuries' sports-page readers from the ugly sight of printed blood. Patricia McKillip's "Riddle-Master" fantasies irritated me by talking for some reason about a riddle's "stricture" instead of meaning or moral ("And the stricture of that is —" said the Duchess). Stephen Donaldson ... but enough. I could go on and on.

So you write "It was getting dark and cold," and feel dissatisfied with the phrase, possibly because the Dark Ruler with his Cold Spells has already been endemic in the narrative. You scratch your head and laboriously substitute: "An insipidated squid-ink photonlessness of Cimmerian intensity commenced to permeate the environs, whose calorific ambience now recalled the supernal frigidity of Cocytus itself." I am naming no names, but some writers think this sort of thing is posh. It must be what Quiller-Couch had in mind when he gave his basic rule of style:

Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it — wholeheartedly — and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings.

Throw away your Roget, and walk again!

**H**ow, then, is the hapless author to convey a bit of fairly banal information? Indirection is a favourite literary tool, blending the facts into the narrative flow. "Bloggs peered ahead, finding it harder to see the track in the failing light; he found himself shivering." Ultimately, all writers have to feel their own way. A plain "The forest ahead could no longer be seen" implies darkness, but might allow the possibility of fog, sun-dazzle in Bloggs's eyes, temporary obscurity by land contours as Bloggs shambles onward, the dissipation of an illusion or mirage, or even (though the calmness of the sentence does rather tell against this) that Bloggs has just been struck blind by a passing Dark Lord.

There are always two questions worth asking. Does the reader actually need to know that it's getting dark and cold? And if so, dare one stake everything on the hazardous chance of simply saying (especially if a lot of fine writing has been perpetrated just lately), "It was getting dark and cold"?

If this sounds like a morbid level of concentration on a puny six-word sentence, remember Samuel Delany's extremely nifty essay which spends two and a half pages discussing a sentence of eight words, with a whole

paragraph devoted to the opening "The." (Which he instinctively visualizes as "a greyish ellipsoid about four feet high that balances on the floor perhaps a yard away." Try to imagine his inner pictures of words like "concatenation," "molybdenum" and "gleet.") It's another trap, of course: if you burst your brain over every definite article you'll never finish anything, whereas — I do believe I feel an epigram coming over me — if you never think about words you'll never write words worth thinking about.

How to bring a story, an article or indeed anything else to a close? The poem points the way:

"First fix upon the limit  
To which it shall extend  
Then fill it up with 'Padding'  
(Beg some of any friend);  
Your great Sensation-Stanza  
You place towards the end."

Oh, Mr Carroll, they're still doing it. Because *The Lord of the Rings* ran naturally into three volumes, this has become the limit to which a fantasy must extend, because the publishers demand it (say the authors), because that's what authors produce (think the readers), because that's what the readers insist on (loudly assert the publishers).

So Book 1 of the trilogy establishes the characters and the problem. "Unless the Scrotum of Pulverulence is joined with the Chaos Runeform at the Blue Moon's Latter Eclipse, Plotdevice the Foul will triumph and introduce VAT on books." Book 2 sees lots of rousing battles and the ultimate, sensational nobbling of the Dark Lord. "What Plotdevice the Foul failed to realize is that by triumphing over us so utterly and frustrating all our noble designs, he inevitably brought about his own defeat!" Book 2 inserts a suitable narrative delay between introduction and resolution, and fatally tends to consist of padding — usually in the form of an interminable journey which advances the plot by approximately as far as the average glacier gets between breakfast and elevenses.

But they get published. God, how they get published. I sometimes wonder whether every aspirant's secret desires are met by the literary-workshop aim of coaxing you to write originally and well. Is this an ivory tower attitude? If the earnest student of this magazine is consumed with impatience to get into print, and the ephemeral, identikit junk on the bookstands seems to show that working hard at good writing isn't necessary, is it kind to preach about long-term damage to one's talent and reputation: about Cyril Connolly's minimal definition of a successful book as one which lasts ten years? It all depends on whether you take writing seriously and personally, or whether...

"Now try your hand, ere Fancy  
Have lost its present glow —"  
"And then," his grandson added,  
"We'll publish it, you know:  
Green cloth — gold-lettered at the  
back —  
In duodecimo!"  
Then proudly smiled that old man  
To see the eager lad  
Rush madly for his pen and ink  
And for his blotting-pad —  
But when he thought of publishing,  
His face grew stern and sad.

#### References:

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- Edmund Wilson: *The Shores of Light* (1952), *The Bit Between My Teeth* (1965)

An earlier version of the above piece first appeared in *Australian SF Review*.

## Notes on Authors

**Stephen Baxter** ("The Gödel Sunflowers," page 37) wrote the well-received "George and the Comet" in our issue 52. He is also the author of the recent novel *Rift* (Harper Collins, £14.99), the novella "The Baryonic Lords" (JZ 49-50) and many other stories. He lives with his wife in Buckinghamshire.

**Stuart Palmer**, who wrote the story opposite, is 23 and lives in Humber-side (where he studied theology for three years at Hull University). This is his first *Interzone* story, but he tells us that he writes "radio plays, articles, horror and so-called women's fiction," some of which have appeared in *Skeleton Crew*, *Bello* and the small-press magazines *Exuberance* and *Sunk Island Review*.



# The Discontinuum Kitchen

## Stuart Palmer

**"I**wouldn't go in there, sir."  
He'll say that first, peering through thick lenses and extending his arm to block the door.

"Can I ask why?" I'll say.  
He'll glance at my briefcase and purse his lips then shake his head very slowly. "I'm only the janitor round here, sir."

"Oh come on," I'll say, "you're a good deal more than that, Mr Audsley. I mean..."

He'll shake his head again and usher me away. "What I was and what I am are two quite separate things, sir," he'll say, but the irony will be lost on me.

I'll stop abruptly by the door opposite. "Listen," I'll say, "if I'm supposed to make a full report to the ministry then it'll have to be just that: a full report. They'll want a thorough breakdown of everything still in this unit and a listing for every room in the place."

He'll look sympathetic. "You're only doing your job," he'll say in vaguely patronizing tone that I won't like much, "but you really must appreciate that I'm only doing mine."

I'll squint to read the plastic sign on the door. It will say "Roberts and Hartley" but the words underneath will be scratched away. Then I'll notice the door and my pulse will begin to hurry.

He'll turn, an expression of dismal resignation on his face. "It's worse on the other walls," he'll say. "That room and the next have been knocked through. It's chaos in there, sir. All hell and all that."

"You've seen it too, haven't you?" I'll ask.

"Yes, sir. That I have. Gentleman, about seventy, pipe and a cup of tea."

I'll nod. That'll be what I'll see, spectral and transparent, the wood of the door shining through him under fluorescent strips. I'll see something else too but I won't mention it. When I look again the old man will be gone and the other face that I saw fleetingly will have faded too. I'll feel afraid. "Just what is it?" I'll whisper.

"Time," he'll say, then smile like a walnut breaking open. "Time for a cup of tea, if that'll take your interest, sir."

"No," I'll say, "I'm...I'm afraid it won't. Just what was in that lab?"

He'll edge away from the wall, edge behind me and try to walk on with me but I won't move. Soon he'll give up and stand against the far wall, hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets. "Experimental lab, sir."

"Experiments on what?" I'll say. "Was it the paranormal? Mr Audsley?"

He'll flex his white moustache and survey the floor. It will need sweeping. I'll be able to see our footprints in the dirt and I'll remember that nobody has walked those corridors for five years. "Paranormal, no, sir. Quite the most normal thing in the world, sir," he'll say, and look at me with expectant brown eyes.

I'll scratch my head and look at my clipboard without reading the figures. "Are you being deliberately obtuse?" I'll say. "Let's look at the next room. We'll come back to Roberts and Hartley, shall we?" I'll walk along the corridor, to an unlabelled neighbouring door, but he'll hurry across and suggest the next one.

"I'm going through this one," I'll say. "You've already failed to tell me exactly why the generators blew out and stopped me entering that door. Any more obstructions, Mr Audsley and I'll make a note of it for the ministry."

He'll raise his eyebrows and mutter something about having fought in the Falklands to keep something or other free and how the kids of today don't appreciate the sacrifices he made and just sit around all day watching the vidcom without a care in the world. I'll smile blandly and reach for the handle.

"On your own head be it then, sir," he'll mutter.

I'll keep up the pretence of a smile and say, "Yes, on my own head be it," then I'll open the door and forget to wear my smile.

**T**he room will have lab benches in it and a few glass tanks that will be empty. In one wall there will be a window that looks out on the back of a hut. Another will be blank but for the small marks of plaster where Sellotape has been removed. The other will draw my attention at once. It will fade in and out. One moment I'll see the wall, see rich wallpaper or pale yellow paint or bare plaster, see paintings and posters that fade in and out even quicker, that disappear and reappear in new locations across the wall. The next I'll see into the next room and see what he'll mean by chaos. There will be terrible cacophonies of sound that will drift in and away, many sounds overlaid on the next; sounds of laughter and talking, crying and chiselling, hammering and music. I'll slam the door.

"Time," he'll say. "Roberts and the other chap were playing with time."

I'll nod and sweep my hair back. To appear calm

I'll study my clipboard and pretend to make corrections to the printed sheet. I'll want to have that cup of tea now but I'll also want to step back inside and just watch the shift.

I'll settle for the cup of tea, promising myself I'll go back there just as soon as I've drained my cup. We'll drink it in Mr Audsley's office at the back of the building. I'll look out across what was once the lawns. I'll see small green mobile huts ranged outside, some muddy patches where huts have been removed. I'll be able to see the perimeter fence from here and the original wall of the house beyond that.

"Roberts and the other chap were lost, sir," he'll say, "the both of them are still in there."

"Still in there?" I'll say.

He'll nod and his eyes will be wide over the rim of his cup. "Some say they've seen them. They step through the walls just the same as the old bloke."

I'll study the surface of my tea and notice my hands are shaking. I'll put the cup down. "So who was the old bl...er...man?"

He'll shrug and sit back in his chair. "Your guess is as good as mine," he'll say. "I don't go round that section of the house unless I've got the old Dutch courage inside of me."

I'll smile and feel foolish for doing so.

"It's like ghosts," he'll say. "Floating through walls and coming and going like nobody's business."

"Mmh," I'll say. "And the wall between the rooms was removed when the building was bought by the ministry..."

"Later than that, sir."

I'll consider.

"If you look through the wall," he'll say, "you can see kitchen staff and old stoves and the like."

I'll sip my tea and feel a sudden urge to go back to the room. "Who used to own this house?" I'll ask.

He'll move his head from side to side then pull a face. "Not my business to know that, sir. I'm only the janitor round here."

That comment will annoy me because I'll have done my homework on Mr Audsley. I'll take up my cup again. "Haven't you ever been curious?" I'll ask.

"Roberts and the other chap were curious," he'll say, "and look where it got them. It got them nowhere, sir. They're in that room."

I'll frown and tap my finger against my cup. I'll want to ask him about the generator again but I'll remember his stubbornness to divulge information. "So the rooms were knocked into one when?" I'll ask instead.

"Oh," he'll say, "that was after the... accident, sir. That was a break-in attempt." He'll shake his head and breathe in deeply at the memory of it all. "They lost two workmen, had to stop them stepping through the hole."

"Were they lost?" I'll say.

"That they were."

I'll nod as though confirming a suspicion. "Do you mind if I take another look up there?" I'll say. "There's no need to keep you. You must be a busy man, Mr Audsley."

He'll refill his cup. "Not really no," he'll say. "Busy man, that is, sir. They just keep me here to ward off the curious and wait for my pension."

"Even so," I'll say, "I would like another look. The

ministry will want an update on the... situation in there."

"I'm surprised they didn't tell you about it," he'll say.

"Yes." My tone will reveal dark suspicions that hint at my unfair demotion to the rank of inspector. I'll stand up and press my cup onto the old desk. "Anyway," I'll say, "I'll just go and have another look."

"Right you are, sir," he'll say. "I'll catch up on my reading then, if that's all right with you." He'll scoop up a copy of *The Orb* and begin to read sensational sewer headlines. Suddenly I'll feel quite out of place in his office and I'll turn abruptly and make my way to the stairs.

**I**n the corridor outside the lab I'll see the old man again. He'll step through the closed door, then vanish. He'll have a pipe and a cup of tea. I'll hurry to the next door, the unlabelled door, and open it slowly. The noise will cover me, coming in rapidly decaying bursts. I'll have to force myself to step inside and then I'll have to close the door. Edging along the benches, I'll be almost hypnotized by the room beyond. I'll see the elderly gentleman in almost every position in the room. I'll see two scientists who I'll presume to be Roberts and Hartley and then I'll see others by the door who I'll at first think to be the same. I'll see ladies in dresses of various periods, dozens of workmen, kitchen staff, and a man in a suit with dark hair and a clipboard.

That will shock me. I'll see that particular man in many places, tracing a path of rapidly fading images from the flickering wall round the room. He'll abide by the pattern of benches that will come and go. I'll take a step closer, then glance quickly at the door. Again I'll wonder why the ministry sent me to do an inventory of the building. I'll wonder for a moment about recent events that make me politically "delicate" and undesirable to know in public. Then I'll take another step and see the man in the suit with the clipboard tucked beneath his arm.

I'll hold my clipboard by the clip and let it swing by my side. I'll think I'm being clever. I'll walk towards the flickering wall and collide with it. The impact will make me stagger, it will take me by surprise. The clipboard will drop to the floor and I'll bend to pick it up.

I'll swear beneath my breath and, without thinking, I'll tuck the thing beneath my arm. Then I'll walk forward and catch the wall at just the right moment. I'll suddenly be in the room and the cacophony will be gone. There'll be silence and I'll see only dusty benches. On the bench by the window I'll see a broken test tube and I'll walk over to it and stare at it. It will give me no clues and I'll shrug and wonder what all the fuss was about. It will seem that the only difference in the room is that movement feels a little strange, perhaps a little slow and each step unrelated to the last.

Puzzled, I'll walk to the door and open it. I'll peer out into the corridor beyond and withdraw rapidly. Now I'll be shocked. It'll be the only rational reaction when the truth hits me. In the corridor, standing by the door opposite but staring straight at me, I'll see Mr Audsley.

At his side I'll see myself.

# C.J. Cherryh

## An Annotated Bibliography

### by Neil Jones

The books have been arranged in chronological order of first publication wherever possible. (\*) indicates the story belongs to Cherryh's Alliance/Union future history.

**The Gate of Ivrel** (1976) Fantasy novel (but with sf underpinning).

First in the (so far) four-book Morgaine sequence. Morgaine moves from world to world and down through time. Her mission is to seal the Gates that make such travel possible – they have already wrecked Gate-spanned space once, and threaten to do so again. A very strong debut novel, with sequels that maintain the same standard.

**Brothers of Earth** (1976) SF novel (\*).

Two humans, from opposing interstellar societies, are marooned amongst low-tech humanoid aliens – who are disappointing compared with those of some of her later books. Otherwise, a strong story.

**Hunter of Worlds** (1977) SF novel (\*).

Powerful aliens, the iduve, pursuing a quarrel of their own, disrupt the lives of their subject race, the kallia, as well as a captured human – but these humanoid races are hard to tell apart. Although apparently part of the future history, this has no clear links with it and reads like a much earlier work than Cherryh's two previous books.

**The Faded Sun: Kesrith** (1978) SF novel (\*).

First in *The Faded Sun* trilogy, which is best read as one long story. The last two survivors of the alien mri, aided by a single human, are pursued across space, by their most recent enemies, humanity, and their ex-employers, the regul. The mri are too humanoid, but the regul are more interestingly alien. A strong, compelling story.

**Well of Shiuan** (1978) Fantasy novel.  
Second in the Morgaine series.

**The Faded Sun: Shon'jir** (1979) SF novel (\*).  
Second in *The Faded Sun* trilogy.

**Fires of Azeroth** (1979) Fantasy novel.  
Third in the Morgaine series.

**Hestia** (1979) SF novel.

Problems with hostile wildlife on a colony world. Minor Cherryh.

**The Faded Sun: Kutath** (1980) SF novel (\*).  
Third and last in *The Faded Sun* trilogy.

**Serpent's Reach** (1980) SF novel (\*).

A young woman comes under threat in a part human, part alien society. The huge antlike aliens are particularly well-conceived and the Alliance/Union background here meshes comfortably with Cherryh's later work. Recommended.

**Sunfall** (1981) SF collection.

The stories all take place in different cities on a very far-future Earth but are otherwise independent. Contains: "The Only Death in the City (Paris)," "The Haunted Tower (London)," "Ice (Moscow)," "Nightgame (Rome)," "Highliner (New York)," and "The General (Peking)." Three of these stories were selected for various best-of-year anthologies.

**Downbelow Station** (1981) SF novel (\*).

(HUGO winner 1982) The pivotal book in her Alliance/Union future history, which details the defence of Pell Station, caught between the opposing forces of the retreating Earth Company Fleet and the new all-powerful Union. Although it has pace and energy, there are too many subplots and no true focus to the book. Still, well worth reading.

**Wave Without A Shore** (1981) SF novel (\*).

Set on a colony world organized along strong, philosophical lines whose citizens are only prepared to recognize what they deem to be real – so the indigenous aliens are ignored. Interesting, but not entirely successful.

**The Pride of Chanur** (1982) SF novel (\*).

First of the four-volume Chanur series, and the only one that stands alone. This HUGO nominee – about a power-struggle over a single human – has impressive pace, a cast of well-realized aliens (including the leonine hani and the malevolent kif) and a strong central character, the hani starship captain, Pyanfar Chanur. (There was also an earlier abridged version [1981] in *SF Digest*.)

**Merchanter's Luck** (1982) SF novel (\*).

Follows on chronologically from *Downbelow Station* although it is not otherwise a sequel. A desperate merchanter, the sole surviving crewmember of his vessel, becomes a pawn of the Alliance military. An enjoyable read.

**Port Eternity** (1982) SF novel (\*).

A clones-in-space reworking of the Arthurian myth. Disappointing.

**The Dreamstone** (1983) Fantasy novel.

First of the two *Ealdwood* novels, this book is a fix-up of two shorter works, "The Dreamstone" and "Ealdwood." Both novels are sombre and effective Celtic fantasies featuring the elflady, Arafel.

**The Tree of Swords and Jewels** (1983) Fantasy novel.

Second in the *Ealdwood* series.

**Forty Thousand in Gehenna** (1983) SF novel (\*).

Ambitious, multi-generational story of the collapse and rebirth of the human colony on the planet Gehenna. Slow at first but building to a gripping climax, it follows a familiar Cherryh theme: humans struggling to understand enigmatic aliens, this time over many generations rather than through a single protagonist.

**Voyager in Night** (1984) SF novel (\*).

A vast alien ship, with a variety of passengers aboard, scoops up three humans – and then interaction begins. Nominated for the Philip K. Dick award. Unusual and effective.

**Chanur's Venture** (1984) SF novel (\*).

Second volume in the *Chanur* series as a whole, but also the first of a three-book follow-up to the earlier novel (and really one very long story arbitrarily divided into three parts). Pyanfar Chanur is again the central character. Tense and gripping all the way through its considerable length, the trilogy is also interesting for the development of the kif since their earlier appearance. The four books together are amongst Cherryh's best work.

**Cuckoo's Egg** (1985) SF novel (\*).

HUGO nominee story of a cloned human child growing up amongst aliens, the wolf-like shonunin. The relationship between the child and his inscrutable guardian is very well done. Strongly recommended.

**The Kif Strike Back** (1985) SF novel (\*).

Third in the overall *Chanur* series, but second in the follow-up *Chanur* trilogy.

**Angel With the Sword** (1985) SF novel (\*).

The novel that kicks off Cherryh's *Merovingen Nights* shared-world series, although it can (just about) stand alone. *Merovingen* is a Venice-like city on an abandoned colony-world – and this story is fast-moving and involving. (See below for further stories in the series.)

**Visible Light** (1986) SF/Fantasy collection.

Contains: "Cassandra" (HUGO winner, best short story, 1979), "Threads of Time" (an sf out-take from an earlier version of *The Gate of Ivrel*), "Companions," "A Thief in Korianth," "The Last Tower" and "The Brothers." Some fine stories, framed by an on-going dialogue with the author that takes place aboard a starship.

**The Gates of Hell** (1986) SF novel (with Janet Morris).

Part of the *Heroes in Hell* shared-world series (see below), a collaboration but with separate subtitled sections ("Iron Lady Down," "Basileus," "Meetings," "Passage," "Of Pawns and Kings").

**Chanur's Homecoming** (1986) SF novel (\*).

Fourth and last in the *Chanur* series, third in the follow-up *Chanur* trilogy.

**Kings in Hell** (1987) SF novel (with Janet Morris).

Part of the *Heroes in Hell* shared-world series (see below), with separate subtitled sections (including "Knight's Move").

**Glass and Amber** (1987) SF/Fantasy collection.

Limited edition. Contains "Homecoming," "The Dark King," "Of Law and Magic," "Sea Change," "Willow" and six articles by Cherryh.

**Legions of Hell** (1987) SF novel.

Part of the *Heroes in Hell* shared world (see below). Portions of earlier short stories in the series are incorporated into this story, which features, amongst others, Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, and a seventeen year old Brutus.

**Exile's Gate** (1988) Fantasy novel.

Fourth in the *Morgaine* series.

**Cyteen** (1988) SF novel (\*).

(HUGO winner 1989) Essential reading for the early days of Union, it tells of the attempt to clone – and effectively recreate – the assassinated Ariane Emory, the long-lived genius behind the cloning and mind-programming of Union's azi servants. Ambitious and successful. (Divided into three volumes for American paperback publication: *Cyteen: The Betrayal*; *Cyteen: The Rebirth*; *Cyteen: The Vindication*.)

**The Paladin** (1988) Fantasy novel.

A peasant girl in search of vengeance asks an exiled, embittered master-warrior to teach her his skills. Set in a world much like ancient China, this is strong on character and sustained tension. Highly recommended.

**A Dirge for Sabis** (1989) Fantasy novel (with Leslie Fish).

First of three collaborations to date (each novel with different authors) in *The Sword of Knowledge* series, created by Cherryh, set in a world that crosses gunpowder with a quasi-Roman empire.

**Rimrunners** (1989) SF novel (\*).

Follows on directly from the events of *Downbelow Station*. Hard-boiled Beth Yeager, on the run after being on the losing side at *Downbelow Station*, signs aboard the not-so-good ship *Loki*. Particularly effective at evoking life aboard a starship, it's also a taut, compelling story with a finely-drawn central character.

**Wizard Spawn** (1989) Fantasy novel (with Nancy Asire).

Second in *The Sword of Knowledge* series.



**Rusalka** (1989) Fantasy novel.

First of the (so far) three-book *Rusalka* series set in a medieval Russia where magic is real. Two young men become involved with a deadly *rusalka*, the ghost of a wizard's daughter. Atmospheric and engrossing.

**Reap the Whirlwind** (1989) Fantasy novel (with Mercedes Lackey).

Third in *The Sword of Knowledge* series.

**Chernevog** (1990) Fantasy novel.

Second in the *Rusalka* series.

**Heavy Time** (1991) SF novel (\*).

Set in the Asteroid Belt in 2320, this is the earliest book in the *Alliance/Union* series so far.

**Yvgenie** (1991) Fantasy novel.

Third in the *Rusalka* series.

**Merovingen Nights** shared-world anthologies (\*) edited by Cherryh (see also *Angel With the Sword* [1985] above).

*Festival Moon* #1 (1987) ("Festival Moon")

*Fever Season* #2 (1987) ("Fever Season")

*Troubled Waters* #3 (1988) ("Troubled Waters")

*Smuggler's Gold* #4 (1988) ("Smuggler's Gold")

*Divine Right* #5 (1989) ("Seeds of Destruction")

*Flood Tide* #6 (1990) ("Flood Tide")

**Heroes in Hell** shared-world anthologies edited by Janet Morris (see also *The Gates of Hell*, *Kings in Hell* and *Legions of Hell* above).

*Heroes in Hell* (1986) "Basileus," "The Prince."

*Rebels in Hell* (1986) "Monday Morning," "Marking Time."

*Crusaders in Hell* (1987) "Sharper than a Serpent's Tooth."

*Angels in Hell* (1987) "The Conscience of the King" (with Nancy Asire).

*Masters in Hell* (1988) "Pawn in Play."

*War in Hell* (1988) "Rook's Move."

*Prophets in Hell* (1989) "The Sibylline Affair."

**Thieves' World** shared-world anthologies edited by Asprin and Abbey.

*Shadows of Sanctuary* (1981) "Ischade."

*Storm Season* (1982) "Downwind."

*The Face of Chaos* (1983) "Necromant."

*Wings of Omen* (1984) "Witching Hour."

*The Dead of Winter* (1985) "Armies of the Night."

*Soul of The City* (1986) "Dagger in the Mind," "Death in the Meadow."

*Blood Ties* (1986) "In the Still of the Night."

*Uneasy Alliances* (1988) "The Best of Friends."

*Stealer's Sky* (1989) "Winds of Fortune."

**Other uncollected short stories**

"The Scapegoat" (\*) (1984) *Alien Stars* (ed. Mitchell).

"Pots" (1985) *Afterwar* (ed. Morris).

"The Unshadowed Land" (1985) *Sword and Sorceress* 2 (ed. Bradley).

"To Take a Thief" (1985) *Magic in Ithkar* #1 (eds. Norton & Adams).

"Swift-Spear" (with Mark C. Perry) (1986) *The Blood of Ten Chiefs* (eds. Pini, Asprin & Abbey).

"The Search" (with Christine Dewees) (1988) *Wolf-song* (eds. Pini, Asprin & Abbey).

"Stormbirds" (1989) *Four from the Witch World* (ed. Norton).

"Wings" (1990) *Carmen Miranda's Ghost is Haunting Space Station 3* (ed. Sakers).


"Gwydion and the Dragon" (1991) *Once Upon a Time* (ed. Del Rey & Kessler).

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# DAN SIMMONS

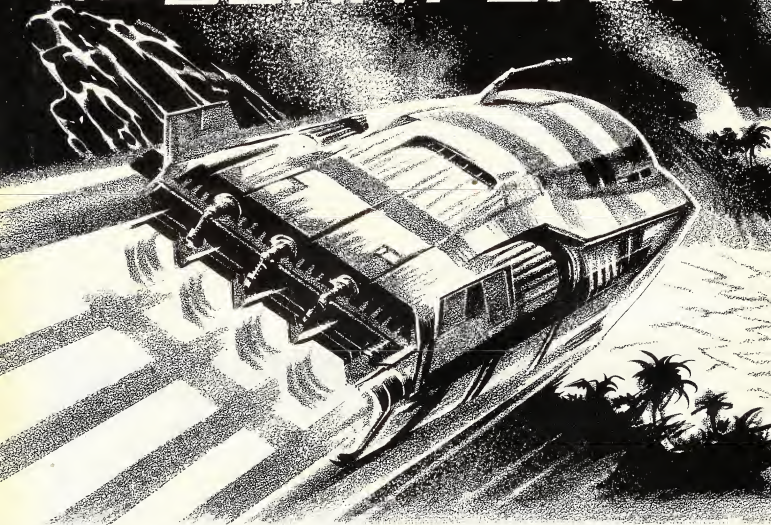
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 **HEADLINE  
FEATURE**

# The QUEEN of the BURN PLAIN



**W**e were thirty kilometres short when I picked out the volcano, sure that it was the one.

I was up front as the cruiser blasted over the Burn Plain at three hundred metres. Down below there were magma pools, forested outcrops of solid rock, winding ribbons of lava fringed with the ubiquitous tangles of thermophytic jungle. Yellow steam rose up towards us, making me glad of the cruiser's integral air systems. Up ahead, the forest thickened where the magma went subsurface.

"I'll be back around in ten days, if you don't call sooner," said Kal, from the controls. He was on a supplies run, detouring to drop me off. He's always liked my little-girl looks: getting him to bring me out here was easy.

There was an entire chain of volcanoes, now, poking up through the long raft of forest, but my destination was the one I had spotted first: a rocky hump, four kilometres in diameter, its summit maybe eight hundred metres above the Burn Plain.

Kal gave me a nod. "Time for it, Gloria." His

expression was grim. He was worried for me, needlessly. I kissed him on the crown of his head and went back to the exit.

Pack in hand, I waited as the cruiser dropped, a screen showing me an allaround view; all this was little more than three hours ago, but already it seems so distant. We lowered into an open space at the foot of the volcano, the door opened and I jumped clear, knees giving easily as I hit the ground.

I remained squatting as Kal pulled away, hanging at fifty metres to waggle the cruiser in farewell, then skimming away seawards on his official business. As soon as I was alone impressions of the wilds bombarded me: the intense heat, the monotonous insect buzz from the brown and green wall of jungle, the smells of burning and sulphur. Instantly my nose began to stream and the sweat began to run inside my loose-fitting jumpsuit.

I didn't have long to wait. Before I had reached the edge of the clearing, I could hear the chattering calls of safrans. A path led up through the forest, but I paused in the clearing, suddenly nervous.



## KEITH BROOKE

They emerged from the trail and spread out around me, more through the pressure of those emerging behind than through any desire to encircle me. These volcano safrans are metre-high bald quadrupeds like their Plateau cousins and their legs have the same unnerving multi-jointed bendiness; their thick, mustard-coloured hide and their stubbier paws distinguish them. We don't know yet if the difference is genetic or merely the result of the Plains lifestyle; the studies haven't been completed.

I glanced up from the safrans and there she was, the Queen of the Burn Plain. She looked stooped and aged, although she is only 47 years old. Her yellow-white hair was long and pinned up into a bun on the back of her head. She was naked, but that didn't look out of place amongst the safrans and the volcanoes. Pulling at my damp clothing I felt like joining her.

There was something in her eyes that held me, something beyond my grasp. She looked as if she had seen everything in human history, the pain, the anguish, the triumph. She looked like a saint.

"You keep coming," she said. "You keep coming

to see me. Am I a zoo specimen? Is that what it is?"

Her words shattered an illusion for me: I had wanted to be the first person to find the Queen of the Burn Plain, the first person to talk with her in all these years. I had wanted all the stories to be untrue: just rumours. But this volcano had been so easy to trace: I should have known that others before me would have made this trip, this pilgrimage to the source of so many colony legends... She must have seen the disillusionment on my face because she shook her head and smiled and I felt better instantly.

She turned and headed back up the hill. I swallowed. I could hardly believe that I was here at the heart of the Burn Plain, actually living the fantasy I had held for so long. Surrounded by a group of safrans throwing themselves through and over the undergrowth, I followed, determined to soak up every element of the experience. In four weeks' time I will be leaving Wegener's World, possibly for good. An Interstitial Ship will be in the system and it will jump me back to Earth, a planet that is only a dim childhood memory for me. The cost of education can be high



in many ways. I can't imagine leaving Wegener's.

It's evening now and we're seated in the safran settlement halfway up the volcano. The Queen – Nadezhda Ösk – hasn't spoken much, but I have told her all about myself: my parents, my friends, my Cousins scholarship, and above all, my desire to find the Queen of the Burn Plain and confirm all the stories about her that pass around the Plateau settlements.

Finally, with the sinking sun, she has relented.

"You can hear my story," she tells me. "For what it is worth. You are lucky: of all those who have searched me out, you are the one who has timed it right, you are the lucky one." I don't know what she means, but I sit and listen, surrounded by young safrans that are apparently mesmerized by the sound of her voice.

**T**he exploratory team's cruiser landed in a carefully selected clearing at the foot of the volcano. They had set out from base camp, back on the Plateau, about seven hours before. There were five of them: Nadezhda and Addy, the geologists; Yoruba-Marrie and Marina, the ecologists; and Joel, the pilot and technician.

Nadezhda got out ahead of them all, tramping up the slope so that she could see over the Plain. She would never tire of that view. Back on the Plateau she would spend hours out on the cliffs. Checking the monitoring stations, she would say if asked, but really she was simply enjoying an experience that was still new to her. This was her first trip across the Interstice; it had taken her longer than most xenologists to acquire the reputation necessary to win a research posting. But now, at 36, she was here and somehow she knew that this alien terrain, this Wegener's World, had always been her destiny.

A hundred metres up the slope, she clambered out onto a craggy outcrop and surveyed the scene before her. Rich green jungle spread out around the foot of the volcano, fingers of it clawing at the slopes, green patches dotted across the middle reaches. After about fifteen kilometres the forest thinned and the Burn Plain started for real: the magma pools, the rivers of molten rock, the solid outcrops too hot even for the trees. Other volcanoes and a few more substantial mountains rose from the Plain, nearby and in the distance. The sky was a bright grey overhead, although oppressive clusters of brown acid clouds hung in the distance. Out to the east it was raining and a mist was suspended above the exposed magma, a creamy blanket that rose and folded back on itself like waves on the sea.

"Come on, Nadia, stop dreaming!" It was Joel, halfway up the slope in the all-terrain vehicle. Nadezhda smiled and waved, then descended from her viewpoint and helped with the unloading.

With three hours to sunset, Joel and the two geologists set off in the ATV. After a few minutes, they stopped and Nadezhda dropped a station over the side and watched as its roof burrowed securely into the ground. A light flashed, telling them it was starting to function, and they moved on.

Before sunset they had completed a circuit of the volcano. The next day they would drop monitoring stations on the higher slopes, until the network was complete.

Back at camp, the first tensions were surfacing. Marina and Yoruba-Marrie were arguing, pausing only when the ATV showed up.

"What's the problem?" said Nadezhda, still on a high from the views.

It was the jungle. For three hours the two of them had been trying to find a way into the jungle.

"Can't you hear them?" said Marina. "I'm sure they're some kind of coralid, but Yorrie says they're just silvarenes. We've tried flushing them out but they won't move. We've tried finding a way into the bush but it's too dense." She waved a hand to take in the barrier of greenery, fleshy stems as thick as a human torso, tangles of twining tendrils plugging the remaining gaps. "We've tried cutting a path, but this stuff is tough – it's nothing like the Plateau vegetation, it's –"

"I keep telling her," said Yoruba-Marrie. "I've been down at Plain level before, I know what it's like. But will she listen?"

They were about to start up again when a high-pitched chattering sound came from the wall of forest. "That it?" said Joel, seizing the opportunity.

"Sounds like half-strangled safrans to me," said Nadezhda, thinking out loud.

"You don't get safrans out here," said Yoruba-Marrie.

"No known records," added Marina. "But..."

Nadezhda stepped towards the wall of green and leaned against it. The fine network of tendrils gave a little but it took her weight easily. She squinted, but couldn't see the forest floor. "Have you tried climbing over the top?"

"And what if it gives way and one of us falls in?" said Yoruba-Marrie. "There's no way I'm going to be trapped in there to starve or worse."

He was right, of course, but then Nadezhda saw a look on Joel's face. "There's a way," he said. "You just need to plan ahead. Come see."

Everybody followed Joel back to the all-terrain vehicle. He worked at the tracks for a few minutes, releasing bolts and catches, and then he reached into the cab and thumbed a control. "Never used them before," he said. "Designed for ice floes and suspended marshland." He stood back as the caterpillar tracks started to inflate. After a few minutes they were fully expanded, great balloon-like things on either side of the ATV. Joel climbed up into the cab and waited as the others joined him, then he started the vehicle in motion. The noise was strange – sounds from the ground and the engine throbbing through the new air-spaces in the tracks – and the ride had a drunken roll to it. In the gathering dusk, Joel flicked on the spotlights and then they headed off along the forest perimeter.

They soon found a point where the jungle must have been starting to spread: the canopy extended down to ground level at a 45° angle. "Hold on," said Joel, as the ATV tipped back and began to climb onto the roof of the forest.

Several times, Nadezhda thought they would slide back to ground level but they didn't and eventually the vehicle levelled out. The ride was more uneven across the jungle canopy, the springiness of the inflated tracks being amplified by the way the vegetation gave as the vehicle passed over it. It was darker, now, but they were all on an adrenalin high and the



spotlights were casting spectacular shadows for hundreds of metres. "Think this'll make things any easier for you?" Joel asked the two ecologists.

The safrans came out the following morning. Joel and Addy were planting more stations on the volcano, leaving Nadezhda to referee the bickering between Marina and Yoruba-Marrie.

She was helping them take samples from the forest edge but they were impatient because they wanted to be up on the canopy in the ATV. Nadezhda, because she didn't share their specialism, was the main target for their sarcasm, so she kept herself quiet and in the background. She couldn't really understand their attitude: this research post was the height of her ambitions, how could anybody feel so irritable when they were somewhere as beautiful as this, recording things no one had ever seen?

"What will you do one you're up there?" she asked Yoruba-Marrie, after a time.

He looked at her, pityingly.

"We can look down into the jungle," said Marina. "We can see what it is that's making all the noises. I'm still convinced it's coralids."

"It's silvarenes," said Yoruba-Marrie. "If we get up there with binoculars we'll be able to identify them when they fly – they can't fly inside the jungle."

"We can set up a camp," continued Marina. "Then we can really get a feel for the place. Nobody's studied the Burn Plain island forest in any depth yet – but we have to be up there to do that, not down here."

"Maybe not," said Nadezhda. She had spotted movement, fifty metres along the forest-wall. She pointed, and the two ecologists stopped what they were doing and raised binoculars to their eyes.

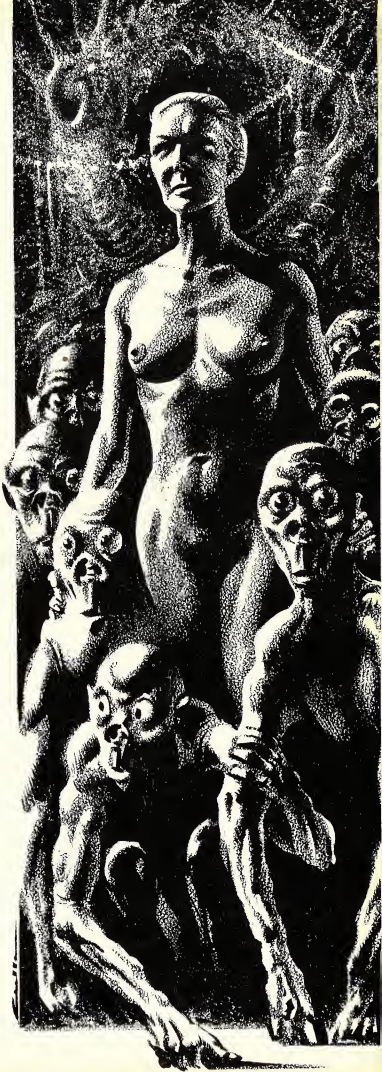
"Safrans!" said Marina. "Four, five, six of them."

They were coming out of the undergrowth, stretching in the morning sun, scratching their faces with their front paws and looking pointedly towards the three humans. And then they were away, lolloping up the side of the volcano, their tough yellow skins somehow blending with the exposed rock whenever they paused. There were safrans back on the Plateau – something like bald apes with flexible limbs and staring yellow eyes – but none had been seen down at plain level until now. The Plateau safrans lived in warrens of about a dozen family groups, constructing networks of scab-like structures: half-burrows built over with saliva-bound mud and stones. A safran warren looked like an eruption of single and multiple blisters on the ground. They could use tools, to a primitive level, but the linguists had been unable to find any semantic pattern to their chattering calls and most specialists put their level of psychosocial development at somewhere close to Terran chimpanzee. Nadezhda watched them, fascinated.

"Come on, Yorrie!" hissed Marina. "We'll track them. Nadia, you stay here, tell the others when they return."

And they were off, up the slope in pursuit of the safrans.

Nadezhda busied herself with sorting the sample bags, which had been discarded in the excitement. They were breaking procedures, leaving her alone, but she didn't really mind, she could look after herself if she had to.



The ATV came down the slope forty minutes later, a good four hours ahead of schedule. Nadezhda was seated in the cruiser, running through readings from the stations they had dropped the previous day. The readings were anomalous: reconnaissance pictures had suggested that this volcano had been dormant for several decades; she checked a print and it showed the crater, ordinary vegetation scattered around a blue lake, no signs of recent lava flows, no signs of recent eruptions. But volcanic gases were seeping out near several of the stations and the gravimeters were drawing a particularly unstable picture of magma distribution beneath the surface. Perhaps nothing to worry about, but definitely anomalous.

She left her study as she heard the ATV returning. She looked out of the hatch and Joel was waving a hand and shouting. "There are safrans! Safrans! Up on the volcano, about four hundred metres up. A whole warren – nearly five hundred bubbles. The biggest warren I've ever seen! There are safrans everywhere."

Soon after the team was established on the volcano, Nadezhda took to regular, unaccompanied evening walks. Usually, she would set out from the cruiser encampment and head up the slope towards the warren. The safrans here were less tainted by humanity than those around the Plateau base camp. They didn't come rushing up, hoping for scraps of food; they tended to ignore humans most of the time, but occasionally they would gather around staring. It could be quite intimidating sometimes, with thirty safrans all around you, some up on their hind legs to get a good look, their chattering silenced. Their yellow eyes, staring. But, after the first time, Nadezhda felt touched; she felt some transient, indefinable link as her eyes locked with those of a crowd of these alien creatures. She even found herself thinking that the safrans were sometimes more amenable company than her colleagues.

They could be exasperating too, as Nadezhda discovered. After three days, she had become worried by the readings from the monitoring stations. They weren't quite consistent with imminent volcanic activity, but they did paint a fascinating, confusing picture: this volcano was by no means dormant.

She had spoken with Addy, at first. The other geologist was aware of the anomalies, but volcanology was Nadezhda's particular specialism and Addy – a geomorphologist – was unwilling to commit herself. Nadezhda had spoken to Joel and a conference had been convened. "We should be ready to move," said Joel. "In case things start to happen."

She had been grateful for his support. And then, the next day, Yoruba-Marrie had come down the slope, dragging a station behind him. "The safrans are your anomaly," he said, when he had finished laughing. "They've been chewing at the casements." It was true: the damage wasn't severe enough to silence the stations, but it could easily have affected the measurements.

Now, Nadezhda sat and watched the safrans in their warren. They ignored her, as they had taken to doing. Marina said their breeding season might be approaching – she had seen similar nervy behaviour before in the Plateau safrans. Wegener's World didn't have a

particularly pronounced seasonal pattern and each species of plant and animal had established its reproductive cycle independently of the climatic sequence; most of the cycles were still uncharted.

She looked up and the sun was still quite high.

She decided to head for the crater. She had been so busy studying the monitor outputs that she had barely left the lower slopes in all the twelve days that the team had been there. Even after Yoruba-Marrie's discovery of the safran damage the anomalous readings had continued; Nadezhda had kept quiet, unsure of the cause, unwilling to face her colleagues' sarcasm until she had some more solid evidence. Maybe the crater would tell her something new.

She set out, heading straight up the slope at first and then zig-zagging where the incline became too steep.

Close to the summit, the ground became almost completely bare. All remnants of jungle had been left behind on the lowest slopes, and the mossy turf had thinned and then diminished to an occasional patch about two thirds of the way up. Now there were just a few scabs of vegetation, clinging to the rocky ground. She knew that the greenery would return at the summit, though, sustained by the waters of the lake and fed by the soil trapped in the crater.

She reached the lip and paused to catch her breath and look back across the Burn Plain.

She was surprised at how low the sun had sunk. She didn't think the climb had taken so long. In the dusk light the magma rivers and pools glowed with their own luminescence, like some substance from another dimension. It was a malevolent glow, a brutal glow. She shuddered and hugged herself despite the heat, then turned to look over the crater. To be alone in an alien setting could be quite daunting at times, she had discovered.

She didn't notice that anything was amiss for several minutes. She was too busy scouting around for a path that would take her safely down the steep inner slope.

When she first saw that the lake had gone she didn't believe her eyes. In the shade of the crater's lip the light was particularly poor, and she couldn't see much at all. The tangle of vegetation she remembered from the reconnaissance prints had collapsed under its own weight, whitened by the sun, a mere skeleton.

She couldn't really accept that the lake was absent until the ground started to level out and she could crouch and feel that the rock was still damp in places. And warm.

She began to panic, so she stopped, made herself calm down. She wished she had brought a flashlight, for suddenly she could see that there were fissures across the floor of the dried lake, some of them great steaming crevasses five or more metres across.

She looked about, squinting in the dim light. The crater was three hundred metres across; the lake had formed a neat circle, a little over a hundred metres in diameter, fringed by a mass of greenery.

She knew what it meant. Changes in the water temperature of a crater-lake could indicate changes in volcanic activity: the thermal power output of a volcano would often double, treble, or even quadruple in the hours before an eruption. The lake waters would start to evaporate.

They might even dry up altogether.

She began to run. She scrambled up the crater mouth, missing the track she had used before, tumbling painfully before relocating the correct route. Over the lip, she ran down the volcano, madly believing that she could actually feel the heat through the soles of her shoes.

She came to a scree slope that she had carefully skirted on her ascent. Now, she braced herself and slithered down the loose surface, jarring her back, bruising her buttocks and legs, winding herself as she came to a halt.

She struggled to her feet and began, again, to run.

**T**hey were startled when she came into the camp, plastered in sweat and dirt from her fall. She tried to speak, but she couldn't make her words come out how she wanted and she had to wait to regain her breath.

"Okay, tell it slowly," said Joel, hand on her arm.

"The volcano – it's going to blow. The crater-lake's dried up and the vegetation's dead and fumaroles are blowing like crazy!"

She saw looks being exchanged between Joel and the others.

"It's true, I'm telling you. Look!"

She grabbed Addy's portable screen and spoke into it, calling up data from the monitors, convinced of what she would see in the latest readings. "Look, Addy!" She waved the screen at her, hoping that another geologist might see what she meant.

Addy was patient. She read the screen, her face growing grave. "There could be something," she said to Joel and the others. "There are gravity changes of 120 microgals over the last 24 hours; small changes in ground electro-resistivity; there have been a number of tiny subsurface tremors."

"See?"

"But why aren't the laser sighters showing up any significant topological variations?" Addy continued. "If the beast was going to blow we'd expect some bulging, some kind of inflation where magma and gases are welling up – certainly with those kinds of gravitational anomalies."

"What about the crater-lake?" said Nadezhda.

"We were up there three days ago," said Joel. "Everything looked fine to me. Wouldn't we have seen some kind of steam output if it had dried up that quickly?"

"I've seen it," she said.

"We'll go and look," said Joel. "All into the ATV – we'd better not split up now."

They were up by the safran warren in a matter of minutes and the animals ignored the ATV entirely. "You don't suppose this could be the reason for their behaviour over the last three days?" said Marina. "Some kind of primitive sense?" The same thought had occurred to Nadezhda, but she had kept quiet. Safrans weren't her specialism.

The scree slope caused the ATV a few problems – the vehicle had never been taken all the way to the summit before. It kept slithering back down the slope, its spotlights picking out rocks falling around them, dislodged by the vehicle's progress. Finally they reached the lip and the spotlights flooded the crater with light.

It was precisely as Nadezhda had described: the missing lake, the dead vegetation, the new fissures and fumaroles belching smoke and steam. As they looked out in silence a small tremor shook the vehicle.

"How long do you give it?" asked Joel, turning to Nadezhda, accepting her expertise for the first time.

"No way of telling. We should have at least an hour but there's no way we can rely on that figure."

Joel spun the ATV and raced back down the scree slope amid a cascade of rocks and dust. They paused again by the safran warren and Nadezhda could see some kind of idea forming in the mind of Yoruba-Marrie. "What about the safrans?" he asked. Joel looked confused, so the ecologist continued. "The safrans – so far as we know they're a distinct subspecies and look at them: like lemmings."

It was true. Nadezhda had not noticed, but the safrans were gathering together in the warren, others streaming up from the jungle. Some groups were already moving, forming a steady flow up the slope, up the volcano.

"They carry on like that," said Yoruba-Marrie, "and they're all going to burn. Shouldn't we catch a few of them?"

"No time," said Joel. "We have to get down to the cruiser in one piece and get clear while we can." He reached for the ATV's controls, but Nadezhda put out a hand to stop him.

"Why should they be heading up the volcano?" she asked. "Does anyone have any idea?" The ground shook again and suddenly none of the others appeared to care about the safrans. "Why aren't they heading down to the forest? They can get through it, they could escape easily!"

"Shut it, Nadia," said Joel, pushing her hand away. "We've got no time for that." He pressed Drive and, before she really knew what she was doing, Nadezhda had swung herself out of the ATV.

"What are you doing?" Joel yelled, holding the vehicle back.

Nadezhda ignored him and ran after the safrans. She heard one of the others urging Joel to forget her, she'd made her choice, and then the engine gunned and the ATV accelerated down the slope towards the cruiser.

Down on the ground, Nadezhda realized how much the ATV had shielded them from the severity of the tremors. Either that or the warren had been constructed on a particularly sensitive site. She looked up the slope but the evening light was too weak for her to see the summit. She would see the lava flows, though, if and when they spilled over the crater lip.

The safrans accepted her in their midst as she joined the procession up the slope, losing her footing occasionally as the earth appeared to be pulled from under her.

It was exciting, she had to accept that it was exciting: there could be few volcanologists who had been this close to a real, unanticipated eruption.

Eventually they came to a kind of hollow in the side of the volcano and there they stopped and waited. The safrans began to chatter like mad, maybe even chanting – she wondered what the linguists would make of this, if they could ever hear it. Irrationally, she wanted to join in. She looked out over the Burn Plain and realized what a spectacular view the hollow

afforded. The safrans around her appeared to be looking out as she was, perhaps just copying her.

She felt guilty, as she waited. She felt that a lot of meaningful thoughts should have been passing through her mind, but they didn't, all she could think of was the view.

Eventually, as the tremors increased in regularity and the ground itself grew terrifyingly warm, she could see the spotlight of the ATV, down on one of the lower slopes, heading for the cruiser.

It was then that the volcano started to erupt. The ground shook violently, and Nadezhda looked out towards the crater, fearful of what she might see. But all that was visible was a plume of steam, white against the darkening evening sky. No lava flows, no violent showers of ash and rock. She wondered if that was all it would be, if the volcano was little more than an over-sized steam-hole, and then she turned to search the lower slopes for the ATV.

Lava flows had emerged from the base of the volcano. Great gobbets of molten rock were being thrown out into the jungle, fissures were opening up to reveal fresh springs of glowing, fluid rock. Everywhere that the forest had grown on the lower slopes of the volcano was being torn apart and replaced by new outpourings of lava.

She looked to where the cruiser had been, these last twelve days. Now there was only lava.

She was certain that that was where the cruiser had been.

She searched, again, for the ATV, and eventually she located its spotlight, appearing dim now, amid the fiery display of the volcano. They had done as she had expected they would. Climbed up onto the jungle canopy with caterpillar tracks inflated, headed out over the vegetation. Given an hour they would be maybe fifteen kilometres out, out where the jungle thinned and the Burn Plain began. They could call up some help from there, be lifted clear.

But Nadezhda could see what her colleagues in the ATV could not. The Plain was alive: tongues of fire were spreading out from the base of the volcano, devouring the vegetation in their path. New magma pools were opening up in the jungle, cutting off any escape route that might have existed. She watched through tears for several long minutes as the vehicle edged towards its fate. A few kilometres out, a deep, sulphurous band cut across their path, hidden by turbulent layers of forest until the ATV was suddenly there, tipping over, down into the fiery chasm. The last Nadezhda Ösk saw of her colleagues was a puff of smoke, black against the bright, infernal backdrop.

**T**he Queen of the Burn Plain is silent now, exhausted by her story. Towards the end her voice had grown husky, her throat dry.

They hadn't known back then that the Burn Plain jungle was thermophytic. New growth would have been sprouting even before the lava had properly solidified, plants germinating in the hot, plastic rock, gaining nourishment from the new outflowings of minerals. The current vegetation pattern would mark the extent of the most recent eruptions. In time the jungle's tap roots would penetrate deep enough to re-open the weak spots in the volcano's lower walls, priming the site for a new eruption, a new outflow of

sustenance. It's one of the most incredible reproductive cycles that has been discovered; some scientists even claim that it's one of the major feedback loops in Wegener's Gaian climatic control systems, although such theories are notoriously difficult to prove.

I shift my position on the rocky slope. I want to ask her why she has never returned to the Plateau, why she turned away the rescue teams when they came, but I feel sure the answer lies in her story, that she would explain no more. I feel that we have achieved a rare sense of communion. I feel honoured.

The safrans are moving and Nadezhda is smiling now, something harsh about her expression. "I told you that you were the lucky one," she hissed, and suddenly I realize that the ground is warm to the touch.

My heart starts to pound and I look around. What do I do?

Nadezhda is still smiling as the first tremor hits. It's a big one, enough to knock me over even as I struggle to my feet.

The safrans have started to head up the volcano, and I don't know what to do. The Queen smiles and turns to join her animals. Suddenly I realize how brave she must have been, to stay on the volcano when every sense in your head is screaming at you to run like hell, to get down off that mountain before it blows.

She looks back, says, "Are you ready to believe an old woman's story, then?" And so she hurries to catch up with the last of the safrans. My eyes follow them up the slope and I know that my legs should do the same, but even now I don't know if I am as brave as the Queen of the Burn Plain.

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**Keith Brooke**, born in 1966, is one of the more successful members of what has been called "the Interzone brat-pack" in that he is younger than most but has already had three hardcover sf novels published by Gollancz – *Keepers of the Peace* (1990), *Expatria* and *Expatria Incorporated* (both 1991). His last story in these pages was "Beefcake" (issue 39).

## FOR SALE

**Interzone: The 2nd Anthology** Paperback edition, New English Library, 1988. It's now officially out of print, but we have obtained some remainder copies for resale to IZ readers at just over half the original cover price – £1.75 (including postage & packing; £2.75 overseas; \$5 USA).

**Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard's Four-Dimensional Nightmare.** A monograph by David Pringle, Borgo Press, 1979. Copies are available from *Interzone* at £3.50 each (including postage & packing; £4.50 overseas; this offer not available to USA).

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A few days ago I bought a book. It made me think of Rob Holdstock, author of *The Fetch* (Orbit, £13.95), in which it is possible to descry, not for the first time in that author's career, a longed-for chthonic realm of root and briar beneath the acid leach of UK Factory Farm. The book, *Orchards and Gardens, Ancient and Modern: with a Description of the Orchards, Model Forms and Factories Owned by Mr. William Whiteley, of Westbourne Grove, London (1895)* by one Alfred Barnard, began like a travelogue. In the ineffable voice of the late 19th-century hotel brochure, it transported us from London – quoting Horace without cease – through rural Middlesex to Hanworth – “the bright hill of Richmond, the leafy walks of Ham, and the majestic Thames in one broad sheet of silver” – and deposited us, after 25 pages of ogling the sylvan, in the middle of Mr Whiteley's brand new garden paradise, 200 acres of farmland north-west of Bushey Park, bought just four years earlier.

Before the purchase, the farm had been timbered, part of Holdstock's dream UK. But Mr Whiteley (born 1831 in Yorkshire) was a modern Englishman. He immediately felled every tree in the 200 acres he now owned. He had the hedgerows cut down. In their place he put up “oak posts and rails,” says Mr Barnard, extolling, “and a galvanized iron wall six feet high extending five miles around the property. This wall was most carefully constructed with close-fitting joints, so as not to allow currents of air to pass through... When this had been completed, six strands of galvanized iron wires were stretched on the inside of all the boundary walls, making a total length of thirty miles of wire.” Fruit trees were then planted in strict grad-ground rows, tenements were built for employees, factory buildings were erected in the heart of the demesne to refine the produce, and Mr Whiteley was in business. This was 100 years ago (today the farm has become Butts Crescent, Glebe Way, Whiteley Way and so forth, easy to miss as you drive towards the M3). Whiteley – who seems to have hired Barnard to extol him and his works – was himself a paradigm representative of the Shopkeeper Caesarism which has, over the 22 years of this reviewer's own sojourn in what was once a complex country, so visibly continued to strip the land bare of hedge and shadow, metaphor and chance, root and briar. Mr Whiteley is one of the conquerors of the UK so savagely anatomized in the flat reportorial pages of McEwan's *The Child in Time* (1987). Mr Whiteley is the terrible changeling solitude Rob Holdstock seems to have tried to repopulate in *Mythago Wood* (1984); he is the nada which, in Kim Newman's *Jago* (1991) reviewed in Inter-

zone 54), England becomes. He is the dead soil in which *The Fetch* plants a green shoot.

It is, perhaps, not very fair to pin *The Fetch* to Mr Whiteley, because there is nothing in the book which overtly evokes him – nothing more, that is, than modern England. Holdstock is very much unlike – say – Kim Newman in that he is a writer of almost excessive



reticence about the political or satirical implications of his work. His books say something about contemporary England only when their readers ask them to. This was not always the case. In the books before *Mythago Wood*, this decorousness generated tales that seemed both insecure and – frankly – without hook, stories whose pages shut in disdain at the thought of being asked to depose.

Back then – in the late 1970s – he was one of the writers frequently described – I don't know if the term was originally theirs – as members of the Faber Group, or the Faber Greys, the exact term has fallen off the memory tree. Along with Christopher Evans, Garry Kilworth, Christopher Priest, and a couple of doleful hangers-on, he wrote books whose use of the instruments of American genre sf was at best fastidious, at worst incompetent, like Triumph Mayflowers trying to put themselves across as inherently

more decent than Beetles. (It may indeed have been the case that Triumph Mayflower sf seemed less slick than the competition. Trouble was, it wouldn't climb hills.) But after about 1982 – which was about the time Faber picked up her skirts and sent her infra dig back to the jungle – this all changed, and the Faber Greys split off into their variously interesting images. The change for Holdstock was vivid. *Mythago Wood* and *Lovandys* – though never explicit about the nature of the circumambient world they sought the roots of – were books whose pages could be asked to depose, though not, perhaps, about details. Their subject was the Matter of Britain, not the condition of England. But the land they grew in – hence the inturning melancholia of the best passages in both texts – was Mr Whiteley's.

*The Fetch*, which similarly inhabits without discourse a landscape of aftermath, is the most exciting novel Holdstock has yet written, the most plotted, and the most easily read as a response to conditions. The story grows from itself, like a tree in an oasis. Around 1980, Richard and Susan Whitlock go through the illegal process of buying a baby from a surrogate mother, and from the first find themselves in a bad-faith relationship with their child, Michael, whom they cannot accept because of the nature of the parentage they had themselves arranged. Simultaneously, paranormal phenomena begin to assault them and their home in the shadow of the Downs in nether Kent, in a village called Ruckingham (presumably a thin disguise for Ruckinge), where Richard's family has lived for generations. He is an archaeological photographer whose career has been blighted by the condition of England and by the fact that he had once pilfered something from a site. Susan is a teacher who restores historical dolls. Like the land they live in, and like their fellow citizens, they are eaters of the past; like other middle-class purveyors of the sweat of others, they inhabit an enclave – their home in Ruckingham – where the fee they charge the world for their lives cannot be assessed in any visible Whiteleying of the terrain. They live, in other words, on credit. Like us.

## Gods and Sods

### John Clute

When it turns out that the son they cannot accept seems to be not only the focus but the engenderer of the paranormal events, and when they discover that he can also fetch extremely saleable relics from the past in his insatiable need to please them, they begin to treat him as Mr Whiteley treated England, as a credit card they will never have to pay off. And when he fails to deliver, they—or more particularly Richard, in whom Holdstock has created an astonishingly repellent, intimately recognizable monster—fall into paroxysms of false relation with their son, with each other, with the criminals they have promised to lend money to so they can become rich as shit, with any surviving sense of professional rectitude. And so the story goes, winding through Dickensian spirals into the snug coign of a kind of happy ending; but not once does Holdstock tell it in the terms laid down here as a crib. *The Fetch* is not about the condition of England; it *inhabits* the condition of England. It is not a satire but a family romance.

As it is told, the heart of the tale lies in young Michael's attempts, by paying them relics, to make his parents believe that he is not an impostor, that he is a whole child, not the "boy without a soul" Richard and Susan—the true impostors, the true changelings of the novel—so blindly "perceive." To make them love him, he continues to run and fetch for them. But when he can no longer do so—at this point Holdstock erects a supernatural apparatus of his usual slightly untoward complexity to dramatize the sciamachy inside Michael's head, but we must leave unexplicated the Chalk Boy in the quarry, the whorled castle, the runes, the monsters swimming in the sea within the labyrinth that Michael built, the fossils, the totem field, the Holy Grail, and Uncle Tom Cobbley—all they can see (as he knows full well) is a "wrong" Michael, a false-boy, and that was why they were so angry with him all the time. They wanted the pretty things, but they couldn't understand that without his shadow he was a false-boy."

Though the effect of the book is occasionally slurred by noveletish diction, and though the redemption of Richard is insisted upon through a cookycutter plot-turn reminiscent of the worst of Victorian melodrama, *The Fetch* as a whole is a drama of stunning intensity, a meticulous tracing of the fissures within a child's mind, an offering. If I find myself compulsively thinking of Michael and England as isomorphs similarly pursued by parasites, I may be playing Procrustes all alone, but maybe I find myself thinking of England because Holdstock has written a book which inhabits its place, because he has created a child who inhabits our time.

It is terribly difficult—indeed it is impossible—to dislike James Morrow, but a novel ain't a guy, and **Only Begotten Daughter** (1990 USA; Century Legend, £13.99) is something of a trial. But let us first say what is good. Only Begotten Daughter is a fable about the life of the sister of Jesus, whose name is Julie Katz; who was born in an ectogenesis machine in New Jersey in 1974 to a Jewish sperm-donor, a desperately nice fellow who dies of heart failure later on; who grows up capable of performing miracles, though her father persuades her not to; who is forced into action by fundamentalist Reverend Milk's assault on Atlantic City, which seems likely to burn the place to the ground until she drowns the fires; who also spends time, as Sheila of the Moon, writing a humanist advice column; who becomes dispirited and accepts the devil's invite to spend some time in Hell; who finds there her brother dispensing mercy and spends 15 years with him in a soup kitchen lading out illicit morphine for the damned, ie everyone (there is only Hell, there is no Heaven); who finds, on her return to the surface, that New Jersey, under the reign of Reverend Milk—who mounts glitzy autos-do-fés to keep the faithful Christians gluttoned—has seceded from the Union; and who undergoes the usual hairy climax meted out to God's kids, after which she is reborn and, with some faithful friends in tow, along with fat Bix her husband and her adorable infant (God damn, its name has slipped my mind), leaves New Jersey for the West, where the whole gang hopes to do some good things. It is funny, impassioned, decent, concerned and rakish. That is good.

What is not so good about the book can perhaps be approached through the quote that Century Legend have been kind enough to print on the front of their otherwise extraordinarily unassuming dustwrapper. "The comparison with Kurt Vonnegut," says *The Times*, "is inevitable." This may be the case, but it may have been slightly unwise to press the point. Morrow may share with Vonnegut a satirical bent, a sense of outrage, a leftwards political cast, a dubiousness about organized religion, a fabulistic storytelling mode; and both men may be equally nice when met. But niceness is a dangerous thing in a book, and it should be noted that none of Vonnegut's novels, and not one of his protagonists of any interest whatsoever, is nice. The first trouble with Only Begotten Daughter, then, is niceness. The voice of the book is nice (occasionally verging on smug); Julie Katz is nice; Bix is nice; her friends are nice; Morrow's own despair at the state of America is nice. All of this we can tell a long ways off. But it doesn't wash, it doesn't bite, it doesn't scour, the ultimate effect—an effect

totally unlike that given off by Vonnegut's books—is one of bewilderment. Only Begotten Daughter seems fatally untouched by the intimacy of the evil of the world it describes. The effect is dazing.

The second problem with the book is the terribly shaky edifice of its plot. Julie Katz as Jesus's miracle-working sister—that was no problem, that was the sort of premise which, once given, could be followed. The problem with the plot lay in its failure to bite into the great rotten apple of the world. One example will perhaps suffice: the secession of New Jersey. I for one could believe in Julie Katz, because that's the sort of premise that traditionally motors satirical fabulations; but I couldn't believe in the secession of New Jersey, because it did not follow from any premise whatsoever. A dark devastating hyperbolic comedy—Kurt Vonnegut's variety, for instance—might have been written about the kind of world in which the political dismemberment of the American theocracy was addressable, though it would be a far more difficult venue to sustain than the kind of world-fabulation in which Christ's sister has arisen; but Morrow didn't even give it a try, didn't even seem to notice that his book was dissolving under him, that the secession of New Jersey had become, in Only Begotten Daughter, nothing more than a conceit. It was at that point I stopped worrying about the fate of Julie Katz, because from that point I knew that sooner or later she'd shrug off New Jersey like Gulliver shrugging off Lilliput, that she would spread her wings above the candyfloss of the text, that she would rise like hot air into the West.

**N**otes. Tor Books continue to publish in paperback the original versions of Orson Scott Card's **Ender's Game** (1985) and **Speaker for the Dead** (1986), both reviewed in *Interzone* 52, and I could not at a swift glance distinguish any textual changes in the new revised hardcover versions of the two novels (Tor, each \$21.95), but they're both long books, the new versions are nicely produced, Card could have done invisible mending throughout, and the original hardbacks have hit the escalator, and now go for \$100 or more. Choice time.

R.A. Lafferty, it is understood, stopped writing about 1984, but the tail ends of his career keep appearing from small presses in pamphlet-sized samplers. **Mischief Malicious** (United Mythologies Press, Weston, Ontario, Canada, \$12.95 Can; \$21 Can Ltd ed), however, though very late in the game, does present a number of prime stories from anthologies and journals, some obscure, though one is from *Playboy*, and the flavour of the man does come through unalloyed. He writes like a

babushka. On the outside, he is a plain man shaped like a pear with a secret stem; halfway to the centre he is Barry Fitzgerald playing the jealous God; at the heart of the doll, very tiny but inside-track, he is mercy.

Gene Wolfe sometimes sounds like Lafferty with his shoelaces tied, but not in **Letters Home** (United Mythologies Press, \$13.95 Can trade; \$45 Can ltr ed), which comprises the actual letters written by the young Wolfe to his mother from 14 August 1952 to 16 May 1954, the period of his service in the American army, much of it spent in Korea. As in the Lafferty volume, *United Mythologies'* proof-reading is execrable – which is excusable at a time when any decent wordprocessing software includes some sort of spellcheck function – and it was less than sapient of them not to have distinguished Wolfe's not infrequent 1952 brackets from those he later (in 1990) inserted around his editorial comments or clarifications. These 1990 comments are significantly more bitter than those from 1952. The letters themselves are young, strikingly unfoolish, less than extravagantly revealing; they are not to be read as some Ur version of the war scenes from *The Citadel of the Autarch*. They recuperate some fragments of a time, and a "police action," which Viet Nam, and MASH, have obliterated from the rearview mirror. For those of us old enough to remember news of Korea on the radio, they are like a flash of home.

(John Clute)

## No Wave Now Paul J. McAuley

If there's a message to be brought back from the World Science Fiction Convention, the genre's annual brawl of mostly North American self-affirmation, it is that we are all waiting for the next Big Thing, the new New Wave, the Movement that will do for the Nineties what cyberpunk did for the Eighties.

Meanwhile, what distinguishes the best new writers is that they have nothing in common but synchronicity. They have no manifesto. They do not plot the overthrow of sf in a dark and musty basement (or if they do, I'm not in on it, which is alarming). They have no new sets of taxonomically useful tropes, and no prophet either. They are simply being themselves. They are not part of any wave or movement (unless it is the deliberately self-contradictory Freestyle Movement), but they often do odd and unexpectedly outrageous things with the stuff which the old movements generated. They are mostly postmodernists, although most

of them would deny it and in many cases their postmodernism is instinctive, not ideological. In short, they are No Wavers, and instead of fitting them into a common, procrustean frame, it is more appropriate, and anyway much nicer and therefore very 1990s, to deal with them one at a time.

Let's start with **Halo** by Tom Maddox (TOR, \$18.95) because on the surface it appears to belong to the last wave, which is to say, of course, to cyberpunk. It is loaded with all the distinguishing tropes: Artificial Intelligence and virtual reality; a near-future Earth-orbit setting; invasive technology; a disaffected hero vaguely associated with the obscure machinations of a supranational company; quick-fix third-world exoticism (in this case it's Burma). But that's just the surface. Beneath its superficial high-gloss techno-thriller shell, *Halo* has considerable moral and intellectual depths.

Its hero, at least at the beginning, is Mikhail Gonzales, a kind of field auditor for a supranational company, SenTrax. While he is leaving Burma with evidence of corruption in the local SenTrax group, Gonzales's plane is involved in a dogfight between government and rebels. He is forced to land in the capital, where customs appropriates and erases Gonzales's electronic records. This near brush with death and being outsmarted flips Gonzales into a new, disaffected state. He relives the episode through virtual reality, but is unable to absorb its meaning. When he is given a new mission he is ripe for change. Gonzales is sent into orbit along with his sentient electronic advisor, HeyMex, to monitor the interface between Aleph, the Artificial Intelligence which controls the Halo corporate space station, and Jerry Chapman, who is neurologically damaged and dying.

Aleph is an unknown, even to itself, having evolved by accident amongst the control systems of the orbital power grid. Its symbiotic involvement with the mind of one of those who nurtured it in its early days is a potential threat to SenTrax's interests. Gonzales joins a collective which explores a virtual reality generated by Aleph for Jerry, a world which collapses when Chapman's body dies and his mind is taken whole into Aleph, a manoeuvre which shatters its consciousness. Gonzales must decide between company and collective when trying to wake Aleph and regain control of the systems of Halo, but by this time Gonzales has become a secondary character. The text has swallowed him. His turning point, when it comes, is thrown away in the middle of a scene where he is not the real focus. Likewise, the threat to the collective made by the supranational company (which appears to con-

sist mostly of rumour and a single executive) simply sublimates.

For, like *Neuromancer*, *Halo* is only apparently a thriller in which the human hero finds redemption through knowledge. The real focus, casually off-stage in *Neuromancer* but wearing through the retold plot moves of *Halo*, is that of transcendence of machine intelligence. In *Neuromancer*, the AI Wintermute moved into a new state remote from human understanding; here, Aleph achieves a synthesis between machine and human made beautifully and movingly real in the closing paragraphs.

*Halo* is a very smart book, impressive in its deep examination of cyberpunk tropes, deliberately postmodern, and literate as hell. Too literate, perhaps, to comfortably wear the disguise it adopts to give a kick-start to its opening pages. Despite the growth of a subplot involving HeyMex's liberation, there are considerable longueurs in the long sea change from high-speed corporate thriller to philosophic humanistic mode. That this doesn't break the back of the novel is a tribute to Maddox's powerfully compressed writing, but one wonders if it might not have been a better book if it hadn't assumed a disguise to get our attention.

One shouldn't judge a book by its cover. One shouldn't assume that Tom De Haven's **Walker of Worlds: Chronicles of the King's Tramp, Book 1** (Roc, £6.99), whose cover painting, framed by crossed swords, depicts a heroic figure with sword raised at a boundary between a contemporary city street (with cat and punkishly hip woman) and a fantasy castle (with bats and menacing cleric), is the start of just one more fantasy trilogy. Well, so it is, although it is also much better than you'd expect, mostly because it concentrates not on the heroic figure (Jack, a Walker, who can move between alternate realities), but on the people who are caught up in his quest.

It is a successful exercise in contrasts. When Walker strains for effect by making his fantasy world deliberately different, such as having the language whistled rather than spoken, it is redeemed by the reactions of the characters transposed from our own contemporary reality: "They were telling each other all about themselves, in Losplit, but every few minutes they'd just crack up laughing, saying – whistling! – hey, would you listen to us, we sound like a pair of intelligent tea kettles!"

This playful strangeness is juxtaposed with vividly authentic details of New York's urban hell, from street life amongst the down-and-outs to million-dollar apartments. And for much of the time, Jack's bog-standard worlds-saving fantasy quest takes a backseat to the plot in which the

mundane characters are already involved before he Walked into their world. Money Campbell, reluctant mistress of childish billionaire Eugene Boman, is searching for Geebo, a bum who has been made to forget he is a journalist because he has found out too much about Boman's pharmaceutical company. Together with Boman's chauffeur and Jere Lee, a dignified bag lady, Geebo and Money Campbell are recruited by Jack to help him to save his Mage and return to the kingdom of Lostwithal so that he can tell the king what he has learned. Neither of the story lines is exactly original, but De Haven winds them together with inventive wit and a knowing irony, and one can almost forgive him for committing a trilogy.

**B**ritish sf still remains a place where writers are judged by their own voice first and use of genre leitmotifs second, which is perhaps one reason why there's an expectation that the next wave may start over here. And of course there are more of us around than ever before, a sudden babble of voices where once there was a wilderness punctuated only by the lonely cries of those stranded by the receding New Wave. One of the newest, and almost certainly the youngest, is Keith Brooke, and *Expatria* (Gollancz, £13.99) is his second novel. Like Brooke's first, *Keepers of the Peace* (which I didn't think much of in *IZ* 48), *Expatria*'s moral theme is the renunciation of violence, by which, individually and collectively, we may be saved. In *Keepers*, the hero saved his own self by transcending his military training; in *Expatria*, the hero may well have saved the world by presenting himself for sacrifice.

It's a lost colony novel. The colonists of *Expatria* have lost contact with Earth and long ago renounced the technology that brought them there, but Mathias Hanrahan, heir to Newest Delhi, one of *Expatria*'s pair of clan-ruled city states, wants to bring technology back. After a disastrous experiment with a public address system, he is framed for his father's murder. He flees to the border city of Orlyons (which more or less exactly maps onto the French Quarter of New Orleans), and is recruited by Kasimir Sukui, self-styled scientist, adviser to the ruler of the city of Alabama, and leader of a project which is trying to revive the old technology. War breaks out between Alabama and Newest Delhi, which is now ruled by Mathias's half-brother. The Alabaman project uses ancient Toshiba trifascimiles to reestablish contact with the Orbital Colonies, descendants of the crews of the original arks which founded the colony of *Expatria*, who tell them that a ship from Earth is approaching. The corporate owners of *Expatria* may be

coming to check out their investment. Mathias becomes a pawn in the war, agrees to return and be tried for the murder of his family, and is rescued, and his father's killer unmasked, by a literal *deus ex machina*.

Civil war on a regressed and isolated colony world is hardly a new theme, but Brooke brings to it a zestful touch of comedy. Like *Halo*, *Expatria* assumes a generic disguise to deliver its message. Despite the political shenanigans that drive its complicated plot, *Expatria* is mostly a comedy of manners. It is the picaresque story of a naive happy-go-lucky hero who learns responsibility, counterpointed by the machinations of Kasimir Sukui, who prides himself on his cold rationality and so fails to understand his fellow human beings. The turns of the plot are negotiated with carelessness and thrilling ease, and Brooke stirs a pleasing ethnic and religious diversity into his cast. But there's a certain thinness to his invention: there are threadbare swatches in the disguise. We glimpse very little of the alien world of *Expatria* itself; war is little more than a few rifle-shots heard in the distance; New Delhi appears to consist mostly of a market and a palace; advanced technology is a 3-D videophone. And the reader should be warned that this slim novel is the first of a two-part work. She will have to wait to find out what the ship from Earth wants with *Expatria*, and whether Brooke's picaresque morality tale possesses a sting.

**S**mall presses are like tiny egg-eating mammals nipping at the heels of the publishing dinosaurs. They have become showcases for innovative work, able to aim it into the market with great precision. Single-author short-story collections, never anything more than marginally profitable at best in the larger marketplace, now tend to appear from the small presses if they appear at all. Two very different examples are Michael Swanwick's *Gravity's Angels* (Arkham House, \$20.95) and Mike Resnick's *Stalking the Wild Resnick* (NESFA Press, \$15).

*Gravity's Angels* is a showcase for a decade's worth of Swanwick's shorter fictions, from his first published short story, "The Feast of Saint Janis," to a descent past the edge of a flat Earth otherwise very like our own in "The Edge of the World," which won the 1990 Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. Swanwick's first two novels were uneven affairs; his third, *Stations of the Tide*, is extraordinary. The stories collected here are luminous with the promise of his ambition, smart and allusive, dense with ideas and images, sacred and profane. We are gravity's angels, is the message of most of them. We live in the human condition, yet we can create God out

of our own selves (literally so, in two of the stories). Gravity's Angels is an essential retrospective. The paper is acid free. The fine interior illustrations are by Janet Aulisio. The jacket illustrations are by Pablo Picasso. If you can find it, and if you can afford it, you should buy it.

Stalking the Wild Resnick is a souvenir from Boskone XXVIII, an American sf convention at which Mike Resnick was Guest of Honour. Themed around his fascination with Africa, there's a short story about Tarzan, an alternate history novella concerning Teddy Roosevelt's adventures in Africa (and "Bully!" is the best and most energetic piece here), some bits and pieces of journalism, two long stories set in Kirinyaga, a space habitat in which traditional Kikuyu culture is preserved, and a waspish retort to those critics who have suggested that the premise of Kirinyaga is a tad sexist. (Which of course it is, because traditional Kikuyu culture treats women as possessions, not people. In both stories, the fanatical leader of Kirinyaga, who will admit no alternative to tradition, is challenged by the obstinacy of women; in both he wins because he has absolute power. Since the stories are narrated from the fanatic's point of view, Resnick's claim that the stories are informed by irony is disingenuous: he might be able to see the irony but we can't, or not yet. Of such things are teapots tempests generated.)

Stalking the Wild Resnick is an odd, personal, quirky collection, a nice souvenir but otherwise only for completists. It's an indication of sf's rich cultural diversity that there's a niche for it. (Paul J. McAuley)

## Tampon Fantasy Wendy Bradley

**T**he heroine loses her knickers in the first paragraph of Piers Anthony's *Virtual Mode* (Harper Collins, £14.99; £7.99pb) and it is full of the kind of prurient detail that will make the target adolescent and pre-adolescent audience feel they are learning some deep mystery about the universe in the disclosure that tampons will flush but pads won't (his research needs work too!). The reason Anthony has so many female readers, I think, is that when he forgets his heroine is female and just describes the way she thinks and feels he is capable of recreating the emotions of adolescence, common to both genders, the confused veering between omniscience/omnipotence and then the desire to cry for your horsy or for a grown up to look after you. But then he remembers the character is not him but a mere



her, and he stops identifying with her and instead tells us she is thinking – what he thinks she ought to be thinking, all about how great it is being a girl. I would be very worried if I saw an adolescent female relative reading this kind of tripe.

Oh, the plot? In some universes magic works, in some it doesn't. Darius comes from a sketchily drawn and unconvincing world where magic works and he meets up with Colene, a suicidal teenager from this world. They fall in love but she thinks he's crazy, he thinks she's depressive (he needs to find someone who can spread joy, don't ask) so they don't go back to his reality together. But then, on thunderclap, they realize it was all a terrible misunderstanding and love could have conquered all, and so he gets a virtual mode set up which crosses realities in ten-foot strips, and is anchored on five individuals, himself, Colene and three unknown others; and he and Colene set off from different ends of the mode hoping to meet up in the middle. They do (Colene accompanied by a telepathic horsy, no really). One of the five is a baddy, so they ditch him and grab themselves a new character in the last paragraph, ready for volume two. This one will run and run, unfortunately.

About half way through David Eddings' **The Ruby Knight** (Book Two of The Elenium; Grafton £4.99) I gave up trying to remember who the ten characters in search of a plot device were and wrote myself a list. I had little trouble with Sparhawk, the knight who is the leader of the expedition, or his friend Kalten and squire Kurik. The woman worker of magic, Sephrenia, is easy enough to identify being the only adult female character with a speaking role other than the occasional buxom wench, and similarly the girl child Flute, although obviously possessed of a Great Secret (which you get to know at the end, he doesn't try to spin that out to the sequel) is clearly distinguished. The boy thief Talen has lots of boy-thief lines but by the last chapter I still had nothing written next to the other three names. I can see the fascination with Eddings, in that I immediately started volume three to see how it all came out, but it is second-rate stuff: this happens and then that happens and then it ends.

**The Sapphire Rose** (The Elenium Book Three; Harper Collins, £14.99) is obscuroly satisfying: they get the girl princess out of the crystal bubble using the macguffin they quested after in volume two, but she turns out to be a tempestuous child-wench who complicates the plot and Sparhawk's life in equal proportions. Female infantilism looms large in both books, as if Eddings' readers couldn't be expected to identify or even cope with an adult

female. Sephrenia is neuter on grounds of age, Flute on grounds of youth, Ehlana on grounds of majesty and having a giant castrating-bitch-guardian. Other than that the good end happily and the bad unhappily – which is, of course, the meaning of fiction. The dead character's wife and mistress set up house together at the end to raise his children in some sort of hippy commune, which seemed a little unlikely, and there is a fair amount of skipping over the difficult bits, with "...and then they met up with King Wargun and his army..." sort of links.

The character names bugged me all the way through – King Otha the bad guy is clearly the Other. The macguffin is the Bhellium which I couldn't get over thinking of as the Belly-um and picturing as some sort of naval jewel, and of course Sparhawk turns out to be the long-awaited "Anakha," he whose fate cannot be foreseen. Anarchy rules, in fact!

I like Roger Zelazny's stuff. I like it a lot. So why haven't I read more of it? Mainly because it's so tiring, I think. I whizzed through **Knight of Shadows** (Orbit, £4.50), an Amber novel, at a speed of knots and I enjoyed watching Merlin (aka "Merle") bounce backwards and forwards between Order and Chaos and the Logrus and the Unicorn (when did we have the paradigm shift that gave us order and chaos instead of good and evil)? Research projects on a postcard care of (IZ please) but there was so much else, so much referring breathlessly back to other Amber novels and forward to others yet to come, plus a magic ring that Merle picked up that seemed to connect to entirely different forces and which he just played about with and carried round ready for a later episode, that I was exhausted.

There was a copy of Merle's evil brother Jurt brought into existence in a fairly fabulous monochrome sequence (no really – I'd give my eye teeth to make the movie) who could be reasoned with and with whom Merle worked out a sort of truce until – whew zap – presto no brother.

As soon as I'd put that one down I immediately picked up the new one, **Prince of Chaos** (Morrow, \$19). Ah, now I remember, that's the way to read the Amber novels: in one continuous sequence one after another, treating them as chapters in a continuing work rather than freestanding works on their own. Read immediately after **Knight of Shadows**, **Prince of Chaos** made far more sense and was far more involving.

Merle finds that he's third in line to the throne of chaos and it looks as though his mother has a great deal to do with the accidental demise of anyone in his way. Can he trust her? And what happened to his father? Read fast,

imagining Zelazny pushing back his fedora and growling "I'm making this up as I go." Brilliant.

**David Gemmell's Dark Prince** (Legend, £8.99) conflates Stoteira and Roxane and says baldly that Alexander the Great married Darius's daughter Roxane and he is convincing enough to make you doubt your own knowledge.

This is the second of Gemmell's books about Parmenion, who was Philip of Macedon's and, later, Alexander's general, and it is fascinating and unsatisfying in equal proportions. I was not terribly happy with **Lion of Macedon**, the first, because the territory is so thoroughly Mary Renault's. However here Gemmell takes us into the youth of Alexander and gives us a fascinating alternate world trip with four-year-old Alexander possessed by a demon, lured across the gateway by Philip's evil twin who, in the alternate world, is possessed by the demon which here attaches to Alexander. I liked the idea of Aristotle as a mage, and liked even more the idea of him having an alternate-reality twin who is a part-time centaur.

However in the later chapters the adulthood of Alexander is sketchily drawn (only a bit part for Hephaiston, no Persian Boy) and so becomes irksome: for once I would have preferred a trilogy, ending Parmenion's story here and perhaps continuing with his son Philotas in a third volume covering Alexander's adult years. The more keen you are on Alexander and his legend the less you will enjoy the latter part of this novel, although the ending itself is a triumph.

Finally there is Simon Green's **Blue Moon Rising** (Gollancz, £7.99). Mr Green appears to be an enterprising chap; a British writer who sprang fully formed from the forehead of an American agent to sell six books to Ace and do the novelization of the Robin Hood Prince of Thieves film script, and has now turned to recolonize his homeland. He appears to have had a rather good English teacher at one point, one of those who emphasizes the importance of metaphor and simile ("Darkness fell across the desert like a hawk upon its prey": RHPoT) and of a gripping opening sentence ("Prince Rupert rode his unicorn into the Tanglewood, peering balefully through the drizzling rain as he searched half-heartedly for the flea hiding somewhere under his breastplate": BMR).

**Blue Moon Rising** is funny and tragic by turns and, if the plot starts to unravel if you think too hard about it, don't lots of others. An unwanted spare prince, his girlfriend (a surplus princess) plus a dragon and a unicorn battle against demonic forces coming from a deep forest and threatening, on

the rising of the Blue Moon of Magic, to take over the world. I like a heroine who stands back-to-back with her hero against all odds, even when the fight seems lost, and I like a unicorn who is willing to limp to cover up the fact that one of our characters isn't qualified to ride him (think about it). I strongly suspect Mr Green may be an elf.

(Wendy Bradley)

## New Worlds For Old Jones & McIntosh

What's in a name? When you're launching a new sf anthology and the name in question is **New Worlds** (VGSF, £4.99), the answer is quite a lot. Fifteen years on from its presumed demise, the trail-blazing magazine has been resurrected as a paperback under the editorial stewardship of David Garnett, editor of the late lamented Zenith series of anthologies, and he promises there will be at least four issues over the next two years. The original Mr New Worlds, Michael Moorcock, is also along in the role of consultant editor and he contributes both the lead editorial and, appropriately, one of the ten stories.

The collection kicks off with Storm Constantine's "Immaculate," a kind of cyber-ghost story, which is spooky and effective, easily Constantine's best short work to date, and an encouraging start to the collection – although it isn't perhaps quite immaculate enough to warrant top billing considering some of the other contenders for that position here. That honour might well have been accorded to Paul Di Filippo's "Any Major Dude." Di Filippo inverts the world: borne on a tide of new, subversive nanotechnology, the Third World's star rises as Europe's fades. Like all good fiction "Any Major Dude" evokes a strong concern for its characters, and like all good science fiction creates a powerful feeling of a strange and awe-inspiring universe.

Also up there amongst the front-runners is Ian McDonald's "Floating Dogs," an offbeat and moving story of a group of augmented animals fighting the last surrogate battles of man's post-apocalyptic world (which, incidentally, has uncanny parallels with Dafydd ab Hugh's recent tale about sapient animals, "The Coon Rolled Down and Ruptured its Larinks, A Squeezed Novel by Mr Skunk"). Then there's the very British, very cyberpunk "Something Sweet" by Simon Ings and Charles Stross, which may not be quite as powerful as the McDonald or the Di Filippo, but runs them impressively close. Messrs Ings and Stross

make particularly imaginative use of a disused London Underground to stage some vivid combat scenes and, on this evidence, should consider working together on a regular basis.

Two names associated with the "old" New Worlds are also represented here. Moorcock's "Colour" is long, the prose has a dense, thickly textured quality, and setting is a seriously chrono-syncretized southern USA. It's pretty hard to work out what (if anything) is going on, but Moorcock gets away with this by convincing you that he knows, and overall the story is weird, evocative and engrossing. Another Grand Old Man of British sf, Brian Aldiss, appears with "FOAM," which manages to somehow deal simultaneously with the weighty topics of global unrest, motiveless murder, memory and cathedrals. Again, we're on fairly familiar Aldiss territory. The story is intermittently engaging, if a little too deliberately quirky; but if you've liked Aldiss's later work then you'll probably like this.

The previous incarnation of **New Worlds** was famous/inamous for its literary experiments, and we get one such in this collection. Unfortunately, it turns out to be the only really unsuccessful story in the book. Jay Summer's "Indeterminacy," a first sale, may (or may not) be a fine piece of abstract literary expression but, as a story, it's simply tedious.

There are a couple of other newer writers here, too. One of IZ's own associate editors, Matthew Dickens, contributes "The Descent of Man," about a society of humans who spend their lives in a permanent state of freefall; an intriguing and well worked-out idea, told enjoyably... and of course everything is bound to fall out well in the end. "Heat" by J.D. Gresham is somehow less substantial, a short tale of altered sexuality which reads smoothly, but fails to give the sense of this (slightly!) different universe beyond the limited confines of the story.

Kim Newman once again shows how the parallel-world story should be done with "Übermensch," which has his now-familiar canny mix of fact and fiction. What if, Newman asks, the rocket ship carrying the infant who was to become the most famous superhero of them all went just a fraction off course and ended up in...? But you'd better read the story.

Then, along with the ten stories and two editorials (one each from Moorcock and Garnett), there's also John Clute's annual review of the sf novels of the year, happily salvaged from Garnett's now defunct Orbit SF Yearbook. This is highly informative as well as informed, and (by Clute's relative standards) very accessible.

And the book has been given a look:

the different stories are set in different typefaces, for one thing, which is actually quite effective. And, in place of artwork, we get various attempts at photo-collage scattered here and there – some of them work well enough, while others look as if they would have been thought less than stunning in a 1960s rag mag.

As to how this collection shapes up against the now-canonized original **New Worlds**: after so long a gap the comparison really doesn't seem valid. After all, sf has quite properly moved on. And, lurking behind the hype that surrounds this literary Lazarus is the truth that this new **New Worlds** is actually far closer in spirit to David Garnett's much more recent **Zenith** series than it is to its namesake. For us, the two **Zenith** books are a more appropriate yardstick to measure this one against – and it is well up to the standard we would have expected from volume three, had the series lived (which should be recommendation enough). In fact, we're inclined to see it as **Zenith 3** in disguise. But if the use of a magic name means this collection has a better chance in the original-anthology market, then that's all right with us. Call it **New Worlds**, call it **Zenith**, call it what you like, it's the stories that count. The ones here set the standard against which future issues will be measured – and it's an impressive one. **Zenith** deserved to prosper and so does this newest of **New Worlds**. We trust that, this time, it will.

A more lukewarm welcome for **A Temps** (Roc, £4.50) edited by Neil Gaiman and Alex Stewart. It's the first in a series of shared-world anthologies to be launched under the new Penguin imprint, Roc Books. The cover blurb tells us to expect "the cutting edge of Superhero fantasy," but the accompanying illustration of a skyborne penknife swiftly persuades us not to take this claim too seriously – which is unfortunately how most of the book's contributors seem to have approached their stories.

A pity, as, potentially at least, the **Temps** scenario has some mileage in it. It may not be all that original to centre a series on the sudden appearance in society of individuals who just happen to have the marketable skills of your everyday superhero – telepathy, telekenesis, levitation and so on. Presumably that's borrowed from **Wild Cards**, the enormously successful American superhero series – but then that clearly derived a lot of its inspiration from superhero comics. And **Temps** has made an effort to be different. A typical **Temp** is usually down-at-heel, depressed, short of cash, compulsively employed by a shifty and monstrously incompetent government department – and has superpowers that mostly turn out to pretty puny and

more trouble than they're worth. Yes, in contrast to *Wild Cards*, Temps is resolutely "British."

And that's part of the problem, because this alternative Britain, fit for seedy superheroes to live in, is built up from just about every known cliché ever perpetrated about the downbeat old die. Supposedly set in the 1990s, this is very much the world of Sid James and Ena Sharples, of endless cups of tea in a crisis, and the bureaucratic hand of the government – the Temps civil service department, for instance, is staffed by a clone of Marcias, identical secretaries who spend all day filing her/his nails.

Many of the familiar names from British sf have been rounded up to get the wordage together. David Langford, with "Leaks," does actually raise the odd smile and at least gives the feeling he's on home ground, taking the piss out of the establishment; and to his credit Brian Stelford gives us one of the more thoughtful stories here, asking the question "how do you know if a precog is really seeing the future?" But then Alex Stewart and Storm Constantine, among others, let the side down with pieces that are more padding than story – and the book concludes with a piece by Roz Kaveney which seems to be nothing but padding. Colin Greenland's lead story, as smoothly told as you'd expect, puts the collection into focus by simply measuring up to its title, "Nothing Special."

There are some newer names here also, who for the most part don't give us anything better, although there's a first story by Liz Holliday, "Third Person Singular," which, while rough-edged, is nonetheless a thoughtful piece on sexual power and its abuse.

And then there is one long (70-page) story which is worth the price of admission. Kim Newman lets his alter-ego Jack Yeovil right off the leash with "Pitbull Brittan," a gung-ho ripping yarn which blends Biggles-style cliché with the Texas Chainsaw Massacre. It's all in the worst possible taste (just for starters, Brittan's superpower is that his "musculature is composed almost entirely of erectile tissue"), intermittently hilarious, and we suspect you'll either love it or absolutely loathe it.

But one story isn't enough to bail out a whole collection and, in the end, Temps isn't so much bad, as just not good enough to make it worth bothering to read, despite the impressive list of contributors. The back-cover blurb reads "Danger: Talent at Work." Yes, but not very hard.

(Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh)

## D-I-Y Anthology Neil Jones

So there you are, minding your own business, when the phone rings. It's Deborah Beale, editor of Legend books. "Hi. Debs," you say. She gets right down to business: how about you putting together a big (she means B-I-G) retrospective anthology of the best short sf over, say, the last 30 years? Not another one of those, you think wearily. But then, just as you're about to say no, a flock of story titles flaps up out of your subconscious. Some are old, some are very recent, but they aren't those generally accepted classics, the ones that have been done way so many times before. No, these are the stories that really meant something to you. Suddenly you're interested in this anthology. No novellas, you decide – even a b-i-g book can run out of room very quickly. "Well," you say, the list of contents already printing out on your eyelids, "I just don't know." And Deborah tells you that, of course, the choice will be absolutely utterly yours. If you want it in, it's in. Now you're hooked, and right when you're on the verge of enquiring "how much?" you suddenly think to yourself: why the hell is she asking me?

Because you're Gardner Dozois, that's why, editor of the world's number-one sf magazine, *Asimov's*, and also, for the last n years, of the premier best-of-the-year anthology, plus assorted theme anthologies: yes, you're the Obvious Choice.

But wait, you protest, your name is not Gardner Dozois. And neither is mine. Which means that *The Legend Book of Science Fiction* (Legend, £8.99) is somebody else's idea of the best sf of the last thirty years. But, all right, now I've got my own list of contents typeset in my mind – as well as a review to write; and, like anyone who's been reading sf that long, I'm going to be very hard to satisfy.

A first glance shows the stories are almost all American, with just Keith Roberts and Brian Aldiss to represent Britain and the Entire Rest of the World. But, that's all right with me – after all, as Dozois says up-front in his introduction, it's his personal best, the stories that really got to him. This collection hasn't been chosen by committee.

Clocking in as the earliest vintage tale (1955) is Damon Knight's "The Country of the Kind." Good, yes, but also one of those agreed-classics familiar to a lot of people. Ditto for Richard McKenna's fine "Casey Agonistes." But there's one of Cordwainer Smith's best Instanturality stories, "Mother Hittion's Littul Kittous"; and Edgar Pangborn's "The Golden Horn," not my first choice of his stories but it's

good to see Pangborn here anyway. Plus that Keith Roberts story, the best from his classic alternate-worlds collection *Pavane*; "The Lady Margaret," is another story that had as strong an effect on me as on Dozois. So far, so good, I think.

Of course that 60s American New Wave double act – Roger Zelazny and Samuel R. Delany (or was that two other people?) are in. But while Delany's powerful "Driftglass" seems the perfect choice, Zelazny is represented with "This Moment of the Storm," which I only rate fair to middling compared with at least two other old Zelazny stories, both of which would have been better choices and which, frustratingly, Dozois mentions in his introduction to the story. Also, although L. Sprague de Camp's time-travel yarn, "Aristotle and the Gun," was/is a good yarn, a classic it simply isn't. And Jack Vance's "The Moon Moth" is both too well-known, and also in my opinion (and Vance is one of my all-time favourite writers) overrated.

There are good stories from R.A. Lafferty, Theodore Sturgeon and James Tiptree. And a short fantasy from Ursula Le Guin, "The Barrow" – not only had I never heard of it, I still can't fathom why Dozois selected it. Also, a Brian Aldiss story, "The Worm That Flies," which I'm not particularly keen on; a Joanna Russ I admired without much enjoying; and Gene Wolfe's "The Fifth Head of Cerberus," which is still strong, highly atmospheric and worthy of a place, but is also novella-length and thus crowds several shorter pieces out. Getting a little closer to the present, we have Edward Bryant's "Particle Theory" and Howard Waldrop's "The Ugly Chickens," impressive choices both.

Three quarters of the way through the book and, although Dozois isn't choosing what I would have chosen more than about one time in three, at least he's prospecting in the right sections of the continent. Grudgingly, I have to admit I'm enjoying the nostalgia trip. Then, somewhere around 1980, we slide across some sort of literary fault line and into the contemporary era of Jack Dann, Connie Willis, Pat Cadigan, Michael Swanwick, Bruce Sterling, John Kessel and a couple of others. Excellent writers, and they're represented by excellent stories here. But the problem is that, apart from William Gibson's "The Winter Market" and perhaps Lucius Shepard's "Salvador," these stories just don't make me believe they are the Best Choices.

Now I'm all too conscious of those many many other stories by other writers that aren't included here. So, right on the last lap, with the 1990s finishing tape in sight, the illusion is shattered. I'm reminded that these are, after all,

somebody else's choices, and the faint but nagging suspicion that, just perhaps, Dozois has got it more or less right ebb away. And with it the idea that this book is anything more than a first-class read and a very creditable attempt at the (almost) impossible task of pinning down thirty years of sf with just 26 stories.

And, in the end, that's a considerable relief. Because although it's good, it's not (of course) a patch on the perfect collection that I (or even, for all I know, you) could put together. That's still in my head, just waiting for — Sorry, that's my phone ringing. Got to go. You never know: it just might be Deborah Beale.

(Neil Jones)

## The Grim Scribe Andy Robertson

After a decade of being published by small-press horror magazines like *Grue*, *Dogon* and *Nyctolops*, Thomas Ligotti's first collection *Songs Of A Deed Dreamer* (briefly reviewed by me in *IZ* 34) has gained the most terrific critical acclaim. In some quarters he is being seriously hailed as the heir of Lovecraft and Poe. Since the publication of that book Ligotti has placed stories in several annual anthologies, and now comes *Grim-scribe* (Robinson, £13.95), another collection.

It's a pity, but it has to be admitted that *Grim-scribe* is not quite as good as *Songs*. I suspect that it includes several old stories that were passed over for Ligotti's premier collection; there is a hint of repetitiveness, and some pieces are really too short to fit the rhythm of the book. However, it is far from being a disappointment. There is nothing here that is not well worth reading, and there are several real gems, including the first story (a centennial tribute to Lovecraft, quite fittingly based on one of his tales, "The Festival"). Even though this is a "Rest of" rather than a "Best of" collection, it is well worth buying.

Is Ligotti as good as they say? Well, the comparisons with Poe and Lovecraft (and they are going to come up so often in this review that perhaps I should abbreviate them P and L from now on) are quite apt. Like both these writers, Ligotti is wonderfully original; he has a dark vision of a new and special kind, a vision that no one had before him. And, like both these writers, there is something *unhealthy* about the vision. Not Poe's obsession with his dead bride, or Lovecraft's incessant fear of inherited madness and miscegenation, but something of the same flavour, even if not of the

same grade. Nothing crude and easy, but rather a refined, dreamy, cerebral playing of games, a distaste for reality, that has fermented itself into something that makes the strictures of reason and logic seem to be not only suspended, but irrelevant. Within Ligotti's hermetic worlds we deal not with waking or with dream but with something else, an unforgiving, solipsistic cosmos.

Like Lovecraft and Poe, too, in other ways. Ligotti's protagonists are nearly all male, nearly all single (if you are the sort of person who worries about this sort of thing, then you won't like Ligotti). They are typically students, preadolescent children, or hermits, and they usually have unreal, truncated names like Plomb, Thoss, Cheev, which serve to further dehumanize them. In short, they are never healthy, functioning, whole adults. Relationships have been excised: these unfortunates exist, not as part of a network of other human beings, but only to bear witness to doom. As in the work of Lovecraft and Poe, the individual, or rather the personal, side of the tragedy is irrelevant.

But in other ways, Ligotti is not like those two. Lovecraft was a realist. For him the true sources of horror lay, not in the imaginations of the past, but in the true shapes of the present and the future, revealed by science. It is for this reason that his greatest stories, like "The Shadow Out Of Time" and "At The Mountains Of Madness," were basically SF, but a science fiction that interpreted the sterilizing threat of infinity and eternity in pseudo-mythological terms. Poe, also, was a realist in his way, staring endlessly at death. (And he tried intermittently to press what he knew about science into his stories, though the pseudo-science of "Valdemar" and Pym is now rather hard to recognize as such.) But Ligotti is not a realist. His horrors are very subtle, very beautiful, but they have no bearing on the real, and that is their whole point and essence. And in the end, I think this leaves him the lesser writer, because mere dreams and nightmares can never compete with the horrors that have their roots in reality. They vanish when you shut the book; but the grave that swallows up our loves, and the infinitely greater abysses of time and space that swallow up all meaning, do not vanish.

(Andy Robertson)

Editor: Neil Jones's C.J. Cherry bibliography (page 47) is the first of a series. We'd be interested in hearing from readers who may wish to produce similar pieces for future issues.

## Rewriting Authors' Prose Chris Gilmore

The initial image in *Dream Weaver* by Jonathan Wylie (Corgi, £4.99) is undeniably powerful. Rebecca, a lonely young girl of noble birth, discovers in a neglected attic a picture of a monk, apparently playing chess with an unseen opponent. Every time she re-visits the picture she finds the pieces are differently placed, yet though she studies the rules of the game, she is never able to deduce its progress.

Unfortunately, Wylie is unable to live up to this fine start. For the reader the effect is as if Vance's *Lyonesse* or Kay's *Tigono* had been left out in the rain. All the elements of a good (if rather slow-moving) story are there, but in a debased form. Suldrun's nurse, so horribly tortured by King Casimir, is a figure of true pathos evoking pity and terror according to the Greek formula. Rebecca's nurse, going senile at sixty, is a source of unfunny malapropisms. Instead of the fearsome and over-controlled Casimir we have Baron Baldemar (for whom read Baron Stoney-broke with a hangerover); instead of Brandin of Ygrath, with his complex motivation, the crude psychopath Cranne — and so forth.

It's a pity, though not the usual sort of pity. Few bad books are bad because the author is incapable of doing any better — one more often finds a cynical desire to leap on the last bandwagon but one, an ingrown contempt for the imagined audience, or the brash assumption that a dollop of soft porn and a knowing nod in the right direction will paper over the cracks. Wylie, by contrast, gives the impression of having studied the very best models in his chosen field, played the sedulous ape, and failed through sheer ineptitude. It's not that the writing is horribly bad all through; there are some excellent passages of tension, as when, near the beginning, Rebecca must control a human-piece chess game with a combination of hand signals and telepathy, neither entirely trustworthy. Near the end an entirely new vision of mother-love is evoked. But whenever the tension drops, the quality of the writing drops too.

So it is all through the book, which divides itself between the adventures of Rebecca and those (equally juvenile) of Galen, stable lad, spy, sometime "Archeologist" (digger of relics from a desert of salt) and, for a wonder, not her lover. This involves a cliff-hanger of 157 pages, which is clumsy but can be forgiven. Other varieties of clumsiness can not, even in a



book with cuddly pets, secret codes, comic alchemists and no real sex, because it's not supposed to be for children. I was constantly arrested by passages of compelling melodrama, sensitive use of character and evocative description, only to see them overwhelmed by yet another bucket of coyness, cliché, misuse ("respective" for "separate," "indulging" for "partaking," "who" for "whom," "may" for "might"), redundancy and italics employed to prop up the rhythm of a lame sentence. The effect is trying, as a typical extract illustrates:

While the Archeologists were celebrating their new-found prosperity and return to land in time-honoured fashion, Shahan had wasted no time in reporting to the castle. He made rapid arrangements for accommodation for himself and his guards, and for the storage of his goods, then made his way to the audience chamber.

This reduces rather easily to:

While the Archeologists were celebrating their renewed prosperity and return to land, Shahan went to the castle. He quickly arranged accommodation for himself and his guards, and storage for his goods. Then he went to the audience chamber.

Hardly Pulitzer material, but about 25% shorter and a whole lot better; a competent editor does this on the automatic pilot, but it's a bit stiff asking the general reader to do it as he goes.

There are missed catches as well. Consider this: "Galen...found the armoury and talked the guards into returning his knife." Since Galen is a resourceful young man of very low status, and the guards are nasty but stupid, here's a fine opportunity for some entertaining dialogue – wasted.

With so much wrong, I can't honestly recommend this book to anyone – the competition's too tough. Yet there's potential here, if the author could only get "his" act together. "Jonathan Wylie" doesn't exist except as the nom de guerre of a married couple called Smith. I don't want to foment marital discord, but couldn't they take on as third collaborator someone who knows which end of an adverbial clause is sharp? Also, seeing that Corgi obviously didn't bother with a proofreader, couldn't one of them have taken on the job? I don't much mind when "tormentor" shows up as "torment," and "flank" as "frank," but what in God's name is "atmthe"? It's a poor cook who can't lick his own fingers.

Thirty-five years ago Gordon R. Dickson was a mainstay of John W. Campbell's *Astounding*, wherein stories by many hands tended to reflect Campbell's own hopes, fears and hang-ups. Prominent among the fears was that Nazi-style anti-intellectualism

might re-assert itself, with massacres of "eggheads" on a worldwide scale. Reading *Wolf and Iron* by Gordon R. Dickson (Orbit, £4.99), I seem to hear Campbell's voice, two decades after his death.

On this occasion a combination of over-population and economic recession has been enough to trigger cultural collapse, so that Jeebee Walther, social scientist, finds himself on the run across Middle America. He carries with him the secret of QSD (quantitative sociodynamics), which is more precious than his own life, for it describes how the collapse came about and, by implication, how social engineering could stop it happening next time round. Ho hum. Did someone mention psychohistory?

The plot combines two traditional elements: the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of passage to manhood; and the novel of process, which informs the reader how things are or should be done. Early on, by means of a rather clumsy plot mechanism, Jeebee acquires a half-tame wolf as companion, and the opening chapters are largely devoted to exploring their relationship as it develops against the background of a group of survivors whom they meet, and in love with one of whom he falls. This makes for a leisurely pace and a Robert Service/Jack Londonish atmosphere which becomes increasingly reminiscent of *Earth Abides* as QSD recedes from view and Merry (for such is her name – I don't think Dickson can have read Martin Chuzzlewit) gets pregnant.

I don't mind any of this, but I do mind the sheer badness of much of the writing. For instance:

If she was the only woman, the reason the rest had probably chosen her to search was probably because either she was the most likely to find any watcher in the woods, or possibly she was the one who could most easily be spared, in case there was an ambush waiting.

Surely Dickson used to write better than this! But it seems to be a rule that the more people credited in the acknowledgements, the more slipshod the style. Dickson credits thirteen, including eight academics, one of whom wrote the introduction. Preserve me from their papers! Moreover, impoverished style obscures a psychological flaw. Consider this rewrite:

If she was the only woman, the rest had probably chosen her to search because she was best at it. Alternatively, she might be the most expendable in case of ambush.

It would be a very odd group of six riders who regarded their only woman as their most expendable member.

I wouldn't mind a pound for every lumpen use of "the fact that," but there is gross carelessness throughout the text. Jeebee would like a good

pair of binoculars, but has to make do with opera glasses. Quite a nice touch, but it wears thin when Dickson laments their inadequacy for the fourth time in six chapters. I was just as unamused to hear Jeebee tell his family history twice, in almost identical words, to different characters. Worst, on p.226 we hear of "Walter Neiskamp, the man who had kept wolves and been Paul Sanderson's customer" (information already known), but on p.228 he's back: "Walter Neiskamp, the customer of Paul Sanderson who had kept wolves." If your short-term memory is weak this may be an advantage; and if you have cloth ears I suppose you won't mind the stylistic lapses, for the story is morally unexceptionable and has very little wrong with it structurally. But the press release quotes *Publisher's Weekly* as saying "Dickson is one of SF's standard bearers." On this showing, he should treat his burden with more respect.

(Chris Gilmore)

## Small Press Round-Up Paul Beardsley

**Auguries**, edited by Nik Morton, 48 Anglesey Road, Alverstoke, Gosport, Hants PO12 2EQ. Quarterly/irregular, A5, 76pp, £1.75 per issue, £7.00 for 4.

**Auguries** No. 14 is the first of two Green Theme issues, so the cover is, appropriately, green. Theme issues have been popular in the past, but this is the first to deal with a topical matter. The first story, "The Conquest" by S.R. Ing, is a mercifully short piece of New Age Gaia personification with some cod *Paradise Lost* dialogue. In Mark Fielder's "Spare That Tree" four men plan to fell a tree as a political gesture. Though marred by one or two clichés ("...An occasional cactus thrust spiky fingers towards the sky in empty defiance..."), this is a reasonably solid story, with the closing remark of one of the characters, "No sense of proportion," fairly summing up the attitudes of some environmentalists.

In "Consumer Goods" Elliot Smith has projected the old schoolboy-smacking-off-for-a-furtive-cigarette chestnut into the future, with cigarette smoking replaced by vegetable eating. Normal, healthy children should be eating, wait for it, television sets. Now this might have worked as the satire of our consumerist society it was clearly intended to be, had the narrative contained a smidge of humour; instead, it's a piece of turgidly unbelievable extrapolation that isn't quite justified by the admittedly effective imagery at the end.

"Zero Summer" by Chris Amies, is reminiscent of 2001 and the last Quatermass series. An underwater slab dubbed TMA-1 – sorry, The Dolmen, is discovered off Exmouth, and thousands of Planet People, er, tourists, are drawn to it. You'll probably guess the rest, but even so this is a well written, entertaining read, qualities that have kept the magazine going for fourteen issues despite a tiny circulation and a virtual absence of "name" authors. Also good is Leon Arden's "The Ice Child," in which Western-Europeanoid aliens visit Earth 6000 years after we've wiped ourselves out, and discover a boy frozen in 1991. The story suffers from being a little too nice, but the gulf of years is evoked in a manner reminiscent of early Clarke.

Also too nice is "Dreams and Raspberry Wine" by Duncan Adams. The good guys (an elderly couple) want to grow a forest, whereas the bad guys (their sons, unhappily) want to chop it down for credible but uninteresting reasons. Things improve as the couple get to witness a nuclear holocaust from an absurdly privileged viewpoint. Then things go all two again. "The Paradisical Dangers" follows, supposedly the same story told from a different viewpoint by Duncan Adams's son – an interesting idea which unfortunately doesn't work. "Erda" by John Hyatt attempts to cover cons in under four pages, but the ponderous, contentless descriptions turn it into another cod epic.

With its average-to-good illustrations, short book and magazine reviews, poetry (which is rarely worth the tree it's printed on), erudite (and usually appropriate) quotations with nearly every story, and typos galore, *Auguries* is the grass-roots of British sf, and well worth a look – most issues are much better than this one.

**The Lyre**, edited by Nicholas Mahoney and Ian Sales, 275 Lonsdale Ave, Intake, Doncaster, S. Yorks. DN2 6HJ. Thirdly, A4, 40pp, £2.20 per issue, £5.50 for 3.

**F**irst impressions of the first issue. It's rather thin for the price. The artwork is unspeakably awful. The contents page is unusual – it omits page numbers. The actual contents look promising though. In the editorial, "Lies," Nicholas Mahoney urges writers to consider their duty to the reader; this too is promising.

The first story, "The Phoenix Experiment" by Eric Brown, tells of a bereaved man coming to terms with his loss through a meeting with a woman who is no longer human in a Rehabilitation Community for damaged space travellers. I have seen Small Press magazines accept trash from some "name" authors in the hope of boosting their prestige, but this is not the case

here; "The Phoenix Experiment" is good Eric Brown.

In Simon Clark's "Stan Laurel Directs The Crucifixion Of Christ (Slapstick & Straight)" Stan Laurel directs the crucifixion of Christ, slapstick and straight. Essential radical stuff for anyone who's never heard of Life of Brian, Behold the Man, Let's Go To Golgotha etc. C.N. Gilmore's "The Miracle Worker" is much better. The leisurely style is well suited to the idea of a man whose miracles are so subtle that nobody can be quite sure if he's doing anything at all. Good stuff, despite the unsurprising ending.

Keith Brooke's "Small Steps" appears to be based on the assumption that the word "fuck" has the same shock-effect it had in, say, 1950. It is the supposedly gritty-realistic account of a near-light-speed trip to Proxima Centauri, in which the narrator makes the incredible observation, "All I could do was thank the gods for relativity. Four and a half years would have been too much for any of us." The astronomical details struck me as dodgy (a life-supporting planet orbiting Proxima? no mention that Proxima is part of a triple star system?) and I found the obsessive descriptions of the astronauts' bodily functions very tedious indeed.

Also: three drabbles (100-word stories), two good ones by Steve Baxter and Michael Cobley and one that reads like 100 words taken at random from Count Zero; two well above average poems (which is not saying a lot) and an amusing spoof horoscope; an interview with Ramsey Campbell; and some in-depth book reviews which give away too much. In conclusion, I expect good things of future issues of *The Lyre*, so long as the editors don't get complacent. A few more pages wouldn't go amiss.

**Exuberance**, edited by Jason Smith, 34 Croft Close, Chipperfield, Herts. WD4 9PA. Quarterly, A4, 72pp, £1.75 per issue, £6.50 for 4.

**A**fter two issues of questionable quality, editor Jason Smith has apparently come to grips with his task and produced *Exuberance* issue 3, which looks good and even reads fairly well. The lead story, "Chicken" by Colin P. Davies, is the best *Exuberance* story yet: strong on ideas, character, and (incidental) plot, it features a pastime likely to terrify any reader with the slightest fear of heights. The illustrations by Roger Morgan are good, too.

This issue showcases D.F. Lewis, and three of his "pieces" are featured here, together with an interview and a bibliography of his vast output. Lewis's is perhaps the most individual voice in the Small Press, sometimes sublime, sometimes unreadable, occasionally in need of serious proof-



reading. "Max Haze" is the weakest of the three. The eponymous lorry driver visits a village prone to flooding and has strange dreams; there's humour here, but no substance. There is humour too in the powerful "Always in Dim Shadow," which is surprising considering the subject matter. As a little girl who has been sexually assaulted tries to understand what has happened to her, the humour serves to emphasize, not trivialize, her bewilderment, sense of abandonment, and realization that she is damaged for life. "Jack In The Box," an amusing account of a talented horror-writer's search for inspiration, might be a satire on some other Small Press authors...

In Peter Tennant's "The Unpragmatic Gesture," a celestial policeman sets out to arrest Yahweh (God) for creating our world without a licence. This begins well, and ends quite well too, but the middle drags as Yahweh keeps popping off to do the things in the Bible that everybody knows about. Christopher Kenworthy's "Skywards" is incoherent and pretentious, typical of the worst of the Small Press where the terms "surrealistic" and "experimental" are not so much labels as excuses.

In Paul Pinn's "Khana" a stoned rock fan on holiday in Tibet gets done in by a hungry ghost. That's the basic plot; fortunately the sense of place and local mythology evoke an atmosphere which lifts this tale well above the level of Pointless Horror Story. Shame about the illustrations, though. On the other hand, Alexander Johnson's "Shutdown" is pointless. For 3000 years the people of the planet Purgatory have been awaiting a broadcast from Alastair Wedlock (the only "character" in the story), and as the time draws near we are treated to several paragraphs describing their anticipation. They think he's God, you see, but we aren't told they think that until it's obvious he's not. The rest is verbose description that doesn't describe, typified by the line, "The

riots were worldwide, and extreme in violence." If Mr Johnson can't be bothered imagining it, why should we?

In addition to the fiction there's an interview with Iain Banks, an article on the works of Peter Straub, and a book review column (marred by its tedious "jokey" title, "Freddie Starr Ate My Hamster"). The variety and quantity is there; the quality is getting there.

**BBR**, edited by Chris Reed, PO Box 625, Sheffield, S1 3GY. Quarterly, A4, 56pp, £1.95 per issue, £6.30 for 4.

**B**BR is probably the strongest argument for renaming the Small Press the Alternative Press. "Is BBR as good as Interzone without being like Interzone?" I hear you ask. And I reply, "Read on."

It is the non-fiction that makes BBR stand out from the crowd. (And the fiction, but I'll come to that.) Issue 19 sees the start of a regular "Brain Fever" column by Maureen Speller, which is essential reading if only for the point made (one among many) that sf-related arguments should be restricted to interesting topics, and not petty squabbles about subcategorization. Another regular column, called "Mogollon News," consists of anecdotes from Mogollon as told by Uncle River, New Mexico correspondent. It has nothing to do with sf but you'll feel like a sci-fi nerd if you don't like it. I like it. Elsewhere, the in-depth reviews cover not only books and UK magazines, but magazines from Czechoslovakia ("What's the use of cyberpunk in a country where you can't even find a functioning telephone box?"), Finland, Germany and Lithuania.

The first piece of fiction, by Misha, is called "Chippoke Na Gomi," which means "Tiny Dust." A minutely-described account of a conversation between a konologist (one who studies dust) and a woman on a station platform, it reminded me a bit of "mood" fiction, except that I've never read a "mood" piece a fraction of the quality of this. The accompanying artwork by Dave Mooring is outstanding, too.

"For As Long As I Live" by Alan Garside is a story about a girl with the ability to travel one minute into the past. She meets a man with the same ability, and is surprised to learn of the uses he's put it to. This is a lightweight, enjoyable tale, providing a pleasant contrast to the Misha story. Fast Lizard Graphics make an appearance on page 23, and in the letters section. "Competent artwork" is a phrase that springs to mind, but so is "self-indulgence," "cliché," and "better off in a college rag-mag."

Alison Sinclair's "Assassin" reads like a laboured attempt to write cyberpunk. Futuristic brain-interfacing sits uneasily with present day PC tech-

nology, and the neologisms are the naifest I've seen — "bright pixel" for "bright spark" merely sets the teeth on edge, but as for dAlty (deity + A.I. — geddit?) words fail me...That's followed by "The Newt Fisher," an atmospheric little piece by Todd Mecklem about three mountain walkers, some Douglas Firs, and a brief, strange encounter by a lake.

Diana Reed's long and well-plotted "Master Finlayson's Boy" rounds off the fiction for this issue. The post-ecocaust world is well realized, as is the robot of the title, and the resultant story is traditionally sf but with modern sensibilities. There's some rough justice for the main female character — she's a double murderer, true, but one of her victims had just raped her. The story is illustrated by Kevin Cullen, who provides portraits of the main characters — an interesting, effective approach.

So, is it as good as Interzone without being like Interzone? Well, I don't really know. Buy a copy and decide for yourself. Better still, get a subscription.

(Paul Beardsley)



## UK Books Received September 1991

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Adrian, Jack, ed. *Strange Tales from The Strand*. Foreword by Julian Symons. Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-212305-X, xxiii+373pp, hardcover, £15.95. (Weird, horror and supernatural anthology, first edition; contains stories reprinted from the famous Strand magazine, by Grant Allen, Conan Doyle, Graham Greene, W.W. Jacobs, D.H. Lawrence, E. Nesbit, Sapper, Edgar Wallace and H.G. Wells among others; there is a simultaneously published companion volume entitled *Detective Stories from The Strand*; both are highly recommended.) 31st October.

Andrews, Graham. *Darkness Audible*. Excalibur Press (13 Knightsbridge Green, London SW1X 7QL), ISBN 1-85634-082-1, 213pp, trade paperback, £7.95. (Sf novel, first edition; this is a first book by a Northern Irish writer, now resident in Belgium, who has contributed fiction and non-fiction to various British sf magazines since the

Belfast-based Extro in the early 1980s.) September?

Anthony, Piers, and Robert E. Margroff. **Dragon's Gold**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21245-0, 282pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1987.) 26th September.

Asprin, Robert. **M.Y.T.H. Inc. Link. Arrow/Legend**, ISBN 0-09-980420-4, xiv+159pp, paperback, £3.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1986; seventh in the "Myth" series; there's a ten-page introduction in which the author says he based these books on the Hope/Crosby "Road" movies.) 3rd October.

Barker, Clive. **The Hellbound Heart**. "The classic novella filmed as *Hellraiser*." Fontana, ISBN 0-00-647065-3, 128pp, paperback, £3.50. (Horror novella, first edition [?]; first published in the USA in the anthology *Night Visions* 3, 1986; this edition also has a 32-page "sampler" from Barker's new novel *Imajico* bound in with separate pagination.) 10th October.

Barnard, Keith. **The Betz Cell**. Souvenir Press, ISBN 0-285-63048-2, 307pp, hardcover, £14.99. (SF novel, first edition; a second novel by the author of the medical thriller *Embryo*.) 24th October.

Bond, Larry. **Vortex**. Macdonald, ISBN 0-356-22133-5, 670pp, hardcover, £14.95. (Near-future techno-thriller, first published in the USA, 1991; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; it depicts a future war in southern Africa.) 25th September.

Brooks, Terry. **The Druid of Shannara**. "Book Two of The Heritage of Shannara." Macdonald/Orbit, ISBN 0-356-20170-8, 423pp, trade paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) 7th November.

Brosnan, John. **The Primal Screen: A History of Science Fiction Film**. Orbit, ISBN 0-356-20222-4, 402pp, hardcover, £16.95. (Film criticism; this edition is heavily revised and expanded version of the author's previous book on the subject, *Future Tense* [1977]; see Brosnan's article in *Interzone* 53.) 10th October.

Carter, Angela, ed. **The Virago Book of Fairy Tales**. Illustrated by Corinna Sargood. Virago, ISBN 1-85381-440-7, xxii+242pp, paperback, £6.99. (Folk-tale anthology, first published in 1990.) 31st October.

Chalker, Jack L. **Soul Rider, Book One: Spirits of Flux and Anchor**. Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-012314-8, 320pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1984.) 26th September.

Chesterton, G.K. **The Napoleon of Notting Hill**. Introduction by Martin Gardner. Illustrated by W. Graham Robertson. Dover, ISBN 0-486-26551-X, xxv+163pp, trade paperback, £4.45. (Futuristic novel, first published in 1904; this is a US edition with a UK price sticker, imported by Constable & Company Ltd.) 23rd September.

Clarke, Arthur C. **The Ghost from the Grand Banks**. Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8361-3, 253pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (SF novel, first published in 1990; a slim novel about the future raising of the Titanic; it's padded out with a 10-page appendix, "The Colours of Infinity," which is all about the Mandelbrot Set.) October?

Clarke, Arthur C. **The Sentinel**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21204-3, 319pp, paperback, £3.99. (SF collection, first published in the USA, 1983; this is effectively a "best of" Clarke, containing such well known stories as "Rescue Party," "Guardian Angel" [which formed part of his novel *Child-*

*hood's End*]) and "A Meeting with Medusa." 26th September.

Clarke, Phil, and Mike Higgs, eds. **Nostalgia About Comics**. Pegasus Publishing [Bradford Court, Bradford St., Birmingham B12 0NS], ISBN 1-873892-00-4, unpaginated, trade paperback, £6.99. (Heavily illustrated guide to comics of the past, first edition.) 17th October.

Collins, Andrew. **The Seventh Sword**. "An amazing true story of magic, sorcery and supernatural drama in Britain today." Century, ISBN 0-7126-4687-6, 484pp, hardcover, £14.99. ("Non-fiction" novel about matters occult; first edition; illustrated.) 24th October.

Cook, Hugh. **The Werewolf and the Wormlord**. "Chronicles of an Age of Darkness, Volume 6." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13538-0, 352pp, paperback, £3.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition.) 17th October.

Cox, Michael, and R.A. Gilbert, eds. **Victorian Ghost Stories: An Oxford Anthology**. Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-214202-X, xx+497pp, hardcover, £16.95. (Supernatural fiction anthology, first edition; contains tales by Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Conan Doyle, Elizabeth Gaskell, Henry James, Jerome K. Jerome, Rudyard Kipling, J. Sheridan Le Fanu, George MacDonald, Robert Louis Stevenson and many others; another fine OUP anthology.) 10th October.

Dalby, Richard, ed. **The Virago Book of Ghost Stories: The Twentieth Century, Volume Two**. Introduction by Sara Maitland. Virago, ISBN 1-85381-454-7, 318pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Supernatural fiction anthology, first edition; contains stories by all-female line-up: among many others, Joan Aiken, A.S. Byatt, Richmal Crompton, Daphne du Maurier, Penelope Lively, E. Nesbit, Ruth Rendell, Jean Rhys, Rebecca West and Edith Wharton; recommended.) 24th October.

Day, David. **Tolkien: The Illustrated Encyclopedia**. Mitchell Beazley, ISBN 0-85533-924-1, 279pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Heavily illustrated companion to the worlds and mythologies of J.R.R. Tolkien's writings; first edition; the illustrations are by Ivan Allen, Allan Curless, Ian Miller, Andrew Mockett, Lidia Postma and others.) 10th October.

Deakin, John. **Barrow**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-13623-0, 336pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 11th October.

Donaldson, Stephen. **The Gap Into Conflict: The Real Story**. Fontana, ISBN 0-00-647019-X, 207pp, paperback, £3.50. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 7th November.

Donaldson, Stephen. **The Gap Into Vision: Forbidden Knowledge**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-223828-4, 410pp, hardcover, £14.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1991; sequel to *The Gap Into Conflict: The Real Story*.) 14th November.

Fearn, John Russell. **Lord of Atlantis: A Golden Amazon Adventure**. Introduction by Philip Barbotelle. Zeon Books [20 Whitecroft, Dilton Marsh, Westbury, Wiltshire BA13 4DJ], no ISBN shown, 68pp, paperback, £4.95. (SF novel, first published; originally serialized in 1949; this is the first of a series of cheaply produced "pulp" reprints, with sf titles by E.C. Tubb and others to follow.) September?

Greenberg, Martin H., ed. **Foundation's Friends: Stories in Honour of Isaac Asimov**. Prefaces by Ray Bradbury and Ben Boy, Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21216-7, 511pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF collection, first published in the USA, 1989; contains original

stories in an "Asimovian" vein by Poul Anderson, Orson Scott Card, Hal Clement, Harry Harrison, Frederik Pohl, Mike Resnick, Robert Shekley, Robert Silverberg, Connie Willis and others.) 26th September.

Haldeman, Joe. **The Hemingway Hoax**. NEL, ISBN 0-450-55195-4, 155pp, paperback, £3.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 45.) 3rd October.

[Hoffman, J.] **Hoffman's Guide to SF, Horror and Fantasy Movies, 1991-92**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-96478-2, 432pp, trade paperback, £12.99. (SF/fantasy film guide, first published in France [?], 1991; contains over 3,000 brief entries and 400 illustrations; there appears to be good coverage of foreign-language films, but the compilers have a curious aversion to Arnold Schwarzenegger: there are no entries for *Conan the Destroyer*, *The Terminator* or *Predator*, which are rather large omissions; no authors or editors are named, the chapter or title page or in the prelims, which is supremely irritating, and there's no explanation as to who or what "Hoffman" is.) 17th October.

Hutson, Sean. **Horror Film Quiz Book**. Sphere, ISBN 0-7474-0792-4, 232pp, paperback, £3.99. (Movie quiz book, compiled by a leading writer of horror fiction; first edition.) October?

Jones, Diana Wynne. **Castle in the Air**. Mandarin/Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-0475-6, 208pp, paperback, £2.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1990; sequel to *Howl's Moving Castle*.) 3rd October.

Kay, Susan. **Phantom**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13758-8, 527pp, paperback, £4.99. (Romance/historical/horror novel, first published in 1990; a sequel by another hand to Gaston Le Roux's *The Phantom of the Opera*, this one received an award as the best romantic novel of last year; reviewed by Kim Newman in *Interzone* 51.) 19th September.

King, Stephen. **Four Past Midnight**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-440-54288-2, 930pp, paperback, £5.95. (Horror collection, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 43.) 24th October.

King, Stephen. **Needful Things**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-54673-5, 696pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 24th October.

Levi, Primo. **The Sixth Day and Other Tales**. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. Sphere/Abacus, ISBN 0-349-10272-4, 255pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF collection, first published in Italy as *Storie Notturne*, 1966, and *Vizio di Formo*, 1977; this translation first published in the USA, 1990.) 14th November.

Lewis, Tim. **Pisspote's Progress: The Odyssey of a Failure**. Illustrated by Paul Cheshire. Leomansey Press [16 Leomansey Rd., Lichfield, Staffs. WS13 8AW], ISBN 0-9517381-0, 377pp, paperback, £4.95. (Satirical fantasy novel, first edition; unlike most small-press items, this book is very modestly priced considering its size and production values.) 7th September.

Ligotti, Thomas. **Grimscrite: His Lives and Works**. Robinson, ISBN 1-85487-090-4, 206pp, hardcover, £13.95. (Horror collection, first edition [?]; proof copy received; the highly praised Ligotti's second book.) 4th November.

Moore, Alan, and Oscar Zarate. **A Small Killing**. Gollancz/VG Graphics, ISBN 0-572-05023-3, unpaginated, trade paperback, £3.99. (Graphic novel, first edition; the premier title in Gollancz's new graphic line;



about the life story of a yuppie, it doesn't appear to have any sf content.) 17th October.

Murakami, Haruki. **A Wild Sheep Chase**. Translated by Alfred Birnbaum. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-013275-9, 289pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy [?] novel, first published in Japan, 1982; this translation first appeared in the USA, 1989; "the novel follows the adventures of a nameless, Sherlock Holmes-reading copywriter who embarks on the trail of a mysterious mutant sheep ... reads like a cross between Woody Allen and Franz Kafka," according to a quotation from the Observer on the back cover; apparently this book was "a million-copy bestseller" in its native land.) 16th September.

Niven, Larry, and Steven Barnes. **Dream Park: The Voodoo Game**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32316-4, 346pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1991; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; third in the "Dream Park" series.) 6th December.

Novak, Kate, and Jeff Grubb. **Song of the Saurials**. "Forgotten Realms. Book Three: The Finder's Stone Trilogy." Penguin, ISBN 0-14-015966-5, 315pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 26th September.

Peel, John. **The Gallifrey Chronicles**. "Doctor Who." Virgin, ISBN 1-85227-329-1, 138pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Large-format illustrated guide to the Doctor Who "Time Lord" myths; first edition.) 17th October.

Pirsis, Robert M. **Lila: An Inquiry Into Morals**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02507-5, 418pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Philosophical novel, first published in the USA, 1991; it's not really a fantasy, but it's certainly a "novel of ideas"; Pirsis's earlier book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was enjoyed by many sf and fantasy readers when it became a bestseller in the 1970s.) 17th October.

Preuss, Paul. **The Medusa Encounter: Arthur C. Clarke's Venus Prime Series**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31727-X, 280pp, paperback, £4.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990; it appears to be part-based on Clarke's short story "A Meeting with Medusa.") 11th October.

Saul, John. **Creature**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-17680-3, 329pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1989.) 17th October.

Saul, John. **Hell Fire**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-17255-7, 344pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1986.) 17th October.

Saul, John. **The Unwanted**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-17462-2, 339pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1987.) 17th October.

Shaw, Bob. **Orbitsville Departure**. Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8359-1, 252pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1983; sequel to *Orbitsville*.) 1 October?

Spiognesi, Stephen. **The Stephen King Quiz Book**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-440-54573-3, 203pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror quiz book, first published in the USA, 1990.) 24th October.

Stableford, Brian, ed. **The Dedalus Book of British Fantasy: The 19th Century**. Dedalus, ISBN 0-946626-84-7, 416pp, hardcover, £18.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous paperback edition priced at £8.99 [not seen]; contains a 30-page introduction by Stableford, and some 22 stories and poems, ranging from S.T. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and John Keats's "Lamia" to tales by Oscar Wilde,

Vernon Lee and Richard Garnett; a fascinating volume, highly recommended to anyone interested in the copious and tangled roots of the modern fantasy genre.) 25th September.

Sutin, Lawrence. **Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick**. Paladin, ISBN 0-586-777-?, paperback, £6.99. (Biography of a major American sf author, first published in the USA, 1989; HarperCollins have kindly sent us a review copy of the US hardcover edition, published by Harmony Books; it is 352 large pages long.) 7th November.

Tsang, Eric. **The Solar Wind**. The Book Guild (Temple House, 25 High St., Lewes, E. Sussex BN2 2LU), ISBN 0-86332-617-X, 134pp, hardcover, £12.95. (Sf novel, first edition; the author is a new writer who lives in Hong Kong.) 10th October.

Vardeman, Robert E. **The Keys to Paradise**. NEL, ISBN 0-450-39001-2, 540pp, paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first published in the USA, 1986; contains three novels: *The Flame Key*, *The Skeleton Lord's Key* and *The Key of Ice and Steel*.) 3rd October.

Waldrop, Howard. **Night of the Cooters: More Neat Stuff**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-987470-9, 326pp, paperback, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy omnibus, first published; contains the stories from the US collection *Night of the Cooters*, 1991, plus the novella *A Dozen Tough Boys*, 1989; the latter was reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 31; see also the interview with Howard Waldrop in *IZ* 52.) 3rd October.

Weis, Margaret. **King's Test: Star of the Guardians, Volume Two**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40275-7, 450pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 17th October.

Wilson, Robert Charles. **The Divide**. Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8365-6, 249pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 40.) 1 October?

Wren, M.K. **A Gift Upon the Shore**. Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-013088-8, 375pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 26th September.

## Overseas Books Received

Anthony, Piers. **Mer-Cycle**. Tafford Publishing [PO Box 271804, Houston, Texas 77277, USA], ISBN 0-9623712-6-2, 262pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Sf novel, first edition; this is one of a series of hitherto unpublished works by well known authors which Tafford is releasing.) October.

Bester, Alfred. **Tender Loving Rage**. Introduction by Harry Harrison. Telford Publishing [PO Box 271804, Houston, Texas 77277, USA], ISBN 0-9623712-4-6, 261pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Non-sf novel by a major sf writer, first edition; this is one of a series of hitherto unpublished works by well known authors which Tafford is releasing.) October.

Card, Orson Scott. **Ender's Game**. Tor, ISBN 0-152-51349-5, 357pp, paperback, \$4.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1985; 14th Tor mass-market printing.) September.

Card, Orson Scott. **Speaker for the Dead**. Tor, ISBN 0-152-51350-9, 415pp, paperback, \$4.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1986; sequel to *Ender's Game*; 9th Tor mass-market printing.) September.

Carpenter, Leonard. **Conan the Hero**. Tor, ISBN 0-152-51907-8, 278pp, paperback, \$3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the

USA, 1989; a sequel by another hand to Robert E. Howard's "Conan" tales.) September.

Dickson, Gordon R. **Steel Brother**. Introduction by Paul Anderson. Story prefaces by Sandra Miesel. Tor, ISBN 0-152-51547-1, xviii+236pp, paperback, \$3.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1985; as well as Anderson's introduction and Miesel's prefaces, this rather slim volume of five stories contains an article by Dickson on his "Child Cycle" and an interview with Dickson conducted by Miesel.) September.

Ford, John M. **The Princes of the Air**. Tor, ISBN 0-152-50958-7, 248pp, paperback, \$3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1982.) September.

Hartwell, David G., ed. **The Color of Evil: The Dark Descend, Vol. 1**. Tor, ISBN 0-152-51898-5, 438pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Horror anthology, first published in the USA, 1987, as part of the huge hardcover volume *The Dark Descend*.) September.

Jones, Stephen, and Ramsey Campbell, eds. **Best New Horror**. Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-8184-762-3, 390pp, trade paperback, \$10.95. (Horror anthology, first published in the UK, 1990; contains a selection of 1989's best stories, including work by Stephen Gallagher, Thomas Ligotti, Brian Lumley, Robert R. McCammon, Kim Newman, Ian Watson, Cherry Wilder, etc.) 14th October.

Lovecraft, H.P. [with August Derleth]. **The Watchers Out of Time**. Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-8184-769-0, 320pp, paperback, \$4.95. (Horror collection, first published in the USA, 1974; these presumably are stories by Derleth, based on Lovecraft fragments, but the publishers have neglected to put Derleth's name on the title page - which is rather remiss of them.) 14th October.

Lumley, Brian. **Necroscope V: Deadspawn**. Tor, ISBN 0-152-50835-1, 602pp, paperback, \$5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1991.) September.

McHugh, Maureen F. **China Mountain Zhang**. Tor, ISBN 0-152-85271-1, 313pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is a debut novel which Patrick Neillson Hayden, Tor's editor, describes engagingly in an accompanying letter as "not a work of 'chinoiserie', but a coming-of-age tale that ranges from New York City to Baffin Island to Mars to the demimonde of cosmopolitan Beijing - a tale of a future neither utopian nor dystopian, a world that encompasses the ambience of cyberpunks, of humanists, and of classic Campbellian sf.") March 1992.

Niven, Larry. **N-Space**. Introduction by Tom Clancy. Tor, ISBN 0-152-51001-1, 693pp, paperback, \$5.99. (Sf collection first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by Stephen Baxter in *Interzone* 41.) September.

Norton, Andre. **Moon Called**. Tor, ISBN 0-152-51533-1, 301pp, paperback, \$3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1982.) September.

Palwick, Susan. **Flying in Place**. Tor, ISBN 0-152-85183-9, 179pp, hardcover, \$16.95. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; a first novel, it comes with an impressive array of advance recommendations from the likes of Charles de Lint, Lisa Goldstein, Gwyneth Jones, Vonda McIntyre, Pat Murphy, Geoff Ryman and Jane Yolen.) May 1992.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. **Remaking History**. Tor, ISBN 0-152-85126-X, 272pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; two of the 15 stories, "Before I Wake" and "A Sensitive Depen-

dence on Initial Conditions," first appeared in *Interzone*, 1 December.

Saberhagen, Fred. *Berserker Lies*. Tor, ISBN 0-812-50563-8, 208pp, paperback, \$3.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1990 [?]; the provenance of the book isn't clear, and it's possibly a recombination of old stories from previous "Berserker" collections.) September.

Spinrad, Norman. *The Children of Hameelin*. Illustrated by Kent Baser. Tafford Publishing [PO Box 271804, Houston, Texas 77277, USA], ISBN 0-9623712-3-8, 310pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Non-sf novel by a major sf writer, first edition; this is one of a series of hitherto unpublished works by well known authors which Tafford is releasing.) October.

Wagner, Karl Edward, ed. *Echoes of Valor III*. Tor, ISBN 0-812-55758-1, 374pp, paperback, \$3.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; contains reprinted stories by Robert E. Howard, Henry Kuttner, Jack Williamson and others; all date from the 1930s, and sf historian/collector Sam Moskowitz is acknowledged for his editorial help.) September.

Yolen, Jane. *White Jenna*. Tor, ISBN 0-812-51840-3, 265pp, paperback, \$3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989; sequel to *Sister Light, Sister Dark*.) September.

## Interaction

Continued from page 32

of *IZ*. The "100 Best Scientific Romances" included all of my favourites, and Brian Stableford's "Tarzan" was both erudite and fascinating. Unfortunately, I already have difficulty in finding time to read all I subscribe to or I would do so to your second magazine.

I much enjoyed Stephen Baxter's "George and the Comet" in *IZ* 52 (although I disliked "The Baryonic Lords"). The illustrations for it by Kevin Cullen were extraordinarily good, as they were for the entire issue. Re your editorial remarks, I enjoyed Ian Lee's "Pigs, Mostly" in *IZ* 50 so much that I hardly noticed the printing errors. Good of you to print the letter from Trevor Jones about Dream's name change to New Moon SF.

**E.R. James**

Skipton, North Yorks.

**Editor:** It's good to hear from Mr E.R. James, who was selling short stories to New Worlds and other British sf magazines so long ago as the late 1940s - "The Rebels" (NW 4, 1949), "Asteroid City" (NW 14, March 1952), "Emergency Working" (NW 17, Sept. 1952), "Where No Man Walks" (NW 18, Nov. 1952), "Ride the Twilight Rail" (NW 21, June 1953), "Space Capsule" (NW 23, May 1954), "Man on the Ceiling" (NW 25, July 1954), "The Minus Men" (NW 26, Aug. 1954), "Rockfall" (NW 29, Nov. 1954), "World Destroyer" (NW 37, July 1955), "Period of Quarantine" (NW 48, June 1956; written with F.G. Royer), "Creep" (NW 51, Sept. 1956), etc., etc.

There he is, alongside the British magazine stalwarts of the era: John J. Aiken, John Brody, William F. Temple, Arthur C. Clarke, Peter Phillips, Francis G. Royer, Sydney J. Bounds, J.T. McIntosh, E.C. Tubb, A. Bertram Chandler, Dan Morgan, Lan Wright, John Christopher, Jonathan F. Burke, Alan Borlsey, James White, John Wyndham, Kenneth Bulmer, John Brunner, Brian Aldiss, Arthur Sellings, John Kippax and (from January 1957 onwards) J.G. Bollord. There were no women. What has become of most of these writers? Some are no longer with us (Wyndham, Sellings, Chondler, Temple); a few have not been published in *Interzone* (Christopher, Aldiss, Bollord); a few are still known to be writing for other magazines and book publishers (Clarke, Brunner, White); but the others we hear little of nowadays. How would readers like a special "Where are They Now" issue of *IZ*?

Dear Editors:

Sf is struggling to find a nineties identity. Hence David Pringle's "exuberance" in *IZ* #49, and the ensuing arguments. I think Trevor Jones (*IZ* #52), misses the point.

To say that I am out of touch with nineties trends, because I favour "experimental" fiction, is amusing. Jones is naive to believe that one issue of *IZ* and a few copies of *Dream* are indicative of modern writing. Contemporary fiction is highly experimental, and because it is concerned with the problems of real people, it is often of a left-wing nature.

*Dream* admirably claims no political overview, but the editorial policy demands "upbeat" stories. Nothing so dirty as reality is allowed to taint their fantasies. Welcome back to the Starship Troopers. This glassy-eyed adolescent fiction avoids issues, and is irrelevant to modern writing.

Contemporary sf must always be experimental in some way, and as such may be less reader friendly. Either we take risks and move forward, or we support "easy" commercial writers. We have literature and we have pop-crap. Hopefully sf can belong to the former.

As sf struggles to realize a new identity, a backlash against the experimental/left movement is unfortunate. Left-wing fiction is not all about doom and gloom - it is about hope. As we move on from touch-tech cyberpunk, perhaps sf can embrace social issues and by becoming politically aware, regain some humanity.

**Christopher Kenworthy**  
Preston, Lancs.

Dear Editors:

I really feel I must write to complain about a glaring blemish on the otherwise fair face of your excellent publication. I am referring, of course, to the

cover of no. 52 [by SMS]. This garish and tasteless illustration does nothing but typify all the negative images and connotations that science fiction has acquired over the years. It was actually a mildly embarrassing experience to publicly purchase a magazine adorned with such an artistically inept and vulgar rendition of a spotty adolescent's fantasy.

To my mind, *Interzone* should be taking advantage of its newsstand distribution to promote and extend readership of sf. To do this, first impressions really are important and high quality graphic images would be a fine way to present sf as challenging fiction that confronts the technological, psychological and social frontiers of humanity. To give the magazine an image of being cliché-ridden, male-dominated, escapist pap is to do your contributors and readers a great disservice.

I must confess to being a little mystified by much of the debate in "Interaction." Surely science fiction is wide enough to contain a large number of different viewpoints, and authors should be judged as individual writers, not as representatives of some school or "tone" that may or may not be fashionable at the moment. Obviously each reader will favour a particular style of writing, but do we really need reams of theorizing to justify this? Do we really want to start laying down rules about what should or shouldn't be published? An open mind is what sf is all about!

Unfortunately I have to point out to Joseph Nicholas that not everyone is as optimistic about the state of the world as he is. Despite the rhetoric of politicians, things in this country continue to get worse for millions of people and the world situation looks, if anything, more unstable than it's ever been, politically and environmentally. But I really see no reason why sf writers should have to be dominated by this. The world of science is too often left hidden behind the headlines, but will always provide an endlessly fertile field for fiction (excuse the alliteration!).

**Tony Owen**

Southsea, Hants.

## IZ Popularity Poll

Don't forget to vote for your favourite stories, illustrations and features for the year just ending. See this issue's "Interface," page 5.

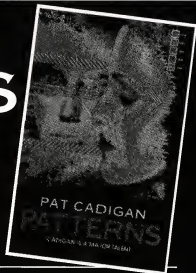
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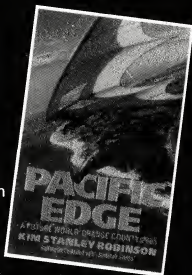
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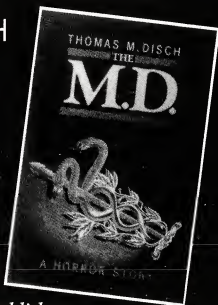


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**J.G. BALLARD** – a critical monograph by David Pringle. Copies available from IZ's address. See advert on page 56 of this magazine for further details. Also for sale: copies of *Interzone: The 2nd Anthology*, paperback edition.

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## COMING NEXT MONTH IN INTERZONE

Ian Watson is back! And with a long story, "The Coming of Vertumnus," which is perhaps the best he has ever submitted to us. There will also be good fiction from Chris Beckett, Diane Mapes, Don Webb and others.

Plus all our usual non-fiction features and reviews. So, have a Merry Christmas and don't fail to buy the New-Year issue of *Interzone* which is dated February 1992 and on sale in January.